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**ANNIE DEANE**

*A Wayside Weed*

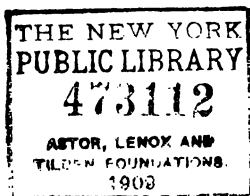
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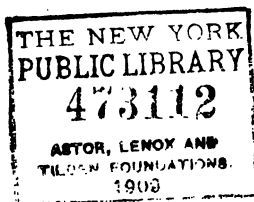
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# ANNIE DEANE

1908  
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ANNIE DEANE



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# ANNIE DEANE.

## CHAPTER I

### WHERE THE WEED GREW

"SURELY there must be some little good in a man when a pretty bit of landscape and a fine day are sufficient to make him glad that he is alive?"

The question was addressed to himself by a young fellow of one-and-twenty, or thereabouts, who stood on the outskirts of a Berkshire wood as a royal August day was drawing to a close.

To the right of him, to the left of him, pine trees; under-foot a thick carpet of dry pine needles, shed year after year, and still left undisturbed. He sent them flying now with a vigorous shuffle of his foot, thus sending up to the soft air a delicious aromatic scent.

He walked on a few paces, stopped to look about him, grew too lazy even for that, and flinging himself full length on the brown carpet, soliloquised afresh, this time Byronically. Byron usually finds favour in the eyes of youth, if only for his magnificent disdain of control.

"Oh! that the desert were my dwelling-place,  
With one fair spirit for my minister."

"Well, now, I wonder if he ever tried it? He tried most things. I don't think the desert would be any improvement upon this wood. Less shady, less safe, and a deuced sight hotter! Besides, the civilised dinner-table may be dispensed with now and then, but I should not care to do away with it altogether. Neither would the 'one fair spirit,' if I know anything. All the women I have known have been mindful of

their creature comforts, and very unpleasant if they were not forthcoming at the usual hour. Whew-w! I'm very thirsty."

The low sun piercing the trees fell on our soliloquist a trifle fiercely; he retreated, and lay down afresh among the bracken. Not a sound anywhere but the sigh of a rising breeze and the slow coo of a wood-pigeon overhead where the branches met.

"Could anything be lovelier?" he inquired tranquilly. "Who the dickens wants anything but peace and fine weather?"

Apparently he wanted something, for in a few minutes he had scrambled to his feet. Even a philosopher may not disdain hunger, and he was very hungry; so he made for the sunny grass-path to his left. He would go on to the village and get him a dinner or a tea, or both together, for he was not fastidious.

At the end of the path was a narrow, deep-rutted road. The village might lie to the right or to the left, but this the wayfarer was inhospitably left to find out for himself.

He stood to consider; the matter was urgent, and he did not wish to waste time by taking the wrong road.

Just then a voice broke the golden stillness, a young voice, shrill and querulous:

"No, Tommy, I can't let you carry this. It's full, and you'll slop it over. It's no use; I shan't, so there!"

He turned sharply—for the voice was behind him—and saw a girl holding a milk-can out of reach of a male youngster, who was frantically pulling at her arm. Finding this useless, he turned savage, and began to kick her.

"Don't, Tommy!" she cried; "don't! Oh, you cruel little beast! I'll tell your mother. Oh, what pests children are!"

"Now, sir, leave off kicking there, will you? You young savage! By George, you can hurt at that game!"

The boy started, then stood sulkily still. The girl started too, and being red with pain could not have been said to blush. She dried her eyes with her print apron, and regarded her rescuer with admiring gratitude. Too awkward to thank him, she made him a little curtsy, and prepared to pass. He stopped her.

"Is it milk you have there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Been far for it?"

"No, sir, only to Farmer Smith's, sir, the other side o' the wood."

the meaning of that dryly-spoken question. Also, the look which accompanied it was of a significant character.

"No; sometimes I comes alone."

"Ah! I see. About the same time, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir, near about seven."

"And always the same way?" He was taking his departure now, walking backwards, leisurely.

"Oh, yes, 'cept when I goes by the road."

He nodded, with his eyes looking straight into hers, and his eyebrows—very expressive eyebrows—lifted. Then he turned on his heel and sauntered off, laughing to himself as he went.

"Jove! how alike they are!" he thought contemptuously. "She's nothing but a *kid*; and she's as ignorant as a baby, but—I'll bet she looks out for me every night for the rest of the summer. 'Whistle and I'll come to ye, my lad!' I don't now that it is even necessary to whistle. What pretty eyes he has! I think I never saw such blue eyes with such black pupils—like a big drop of ink! Just for a lark I will stay over to-morrow, to see if she comes."

The girl herself went hurriedly home with the milk. She had hitherto been a good girl and truthful, but to-night she went into the first shop she passed, and there changed her billing that she might be able to buy Tommy's silence concerning the stranger.

"Not as it matters if he told," thought she, "but mother 'd be sure to say I hadn't ought to 'a spoke to 'im, an' she'd stop me goin' for the milk. I believes as he meant he'd be there to-morrow. P'raps he didn't, but I shall go, an' *I shan't take Tommy.*"

## CHAPTER II

ALAS!

SHE went, and she did not take Tommy. Her new acquaintance watched from behind a tree to convince himself that she really came to look for him. There was little doubt of that, so he emerged from his hiding-place, a trifle sorry for having come. Still, being there, he found it necessary to say something, so he set the girl talking about herself. She told him that her name was Annie Deane, that her father was Dan'l Deane, and worked on Squire Godden's farm, that she was the eldest of ten children, and that the baby was three months old. She said again that she was seventeen—seventeen her last birthday, and as Tommy was not there to contradict her, the statement was allowed to pass.

Having told what little there was to tell, she relapsed into silence—a silence which would have been insupportable but for the dumb eloquence of the blue eyes with the “big drop of ink in the middle.” Something in the young man's heart responded to that dumb eloquence. Also, his own eyes had a little to say, and, the girl stumbling a bit over the pine roots and brambles, he put his arm through hers to steady her. In the absence of a chaperon, or the fear of Mrs. Grunly, intercourse between two youthful people of this sort is prone to swift development.

Annie got the milk, had it carried through the wood for her, stayed long enough talking, afterwards, to let the sun go down, and to make her mother wonder what had become of her, but not long enough to elicit any mention of the next day.

“I'll be through here agen to-morrow,” said she, with a sort of timid recklessness.

He watched her glowing face and laughed.

“Oh, heaven knows where I shall be to-morrow,” he said lightly; “miles away, probably.”

But the next day found him in the same place, and the next evening found him talking to Annie Deane. Why, he could not have told you, could not have told himself. To

begin with, he honestly meant no harm. He was idle; he had two or three weeks to kill somehow, because he was waiting for a chum with whom he was going abroad; he was supposed to be on the tramp—a favourite holiday occupation of his—and he had come to a sudden and unexpected standstill. This was all he knew. A girl's blue eyes, and a want of moral courage kept him at a standstill. Every ensuing day found him in earnest contemplation of departure; every evening found him strolling through the wood, waiting for Annie Deane. Not that he cared two straws about the girl, which made things all the worse. In fact, he cared for very little, having hitherto found little worth caring for. Even his opinions were at present unformed, hazy. His only religion had been Self, and a very comfortable religion he had found it. It may be that Annie Deane had some attraction for him on the score of being his first disciple.

Also, she interested him because there seemed to be more in her than he succeeded in drawing out. She looked intelligent, but her speech did not confirm her look, being for the most part slow and diffident. The childish pertness which had amused him at first disappeared as they saw more of each other, leaving her quiet, but—as the young fellow thought—affectionate; which was amusing, if a little tiresome.

His standard of womanhood was low. He lifted his hat to a woman, or opened a door for her just as he removed the hat upon entering a house, or said "Thank you" for any service rendered him. Custom demanded these courtesies, and "use is second nature," but reverence in the one case was as absent as gratitude in the other. He saw no reason to reverence women. Even Annie Deane showed him that Evil was the feminine instinct, and not Good. Here was a girl, brought up in seclusion, taught nothing but right, who yet took to wrong "as a young duck to water"; who at the first sign of a beckoning hand, followed it, caring nothing that it beckoned her in the opposite direction to the one she had soberly taken all her life. The young cynic felt something like a pang of disappointment or regret as this fresh example confirmed his theory, which showed that deep down in him, somewhere, was the germ of a nobler faith.

"Why do you come here to meet me?" he asked Annie, when these clandestine meetings had been going on for more than a week.



They were sauntering through the wood, she with the milk-can which served as a blind.

"You ast' me to," responded she promptly.

"I don't think I did—quite."

"Well, you said as you might be here."

"Did I? I don't remember."

"I do."

"I say, Annie, you must be used to this sort of thing."

"What sort o' thing?"

"To meeting fellows here."

"That I'm not!" she said, with injured vehemence.

"Has a man ever asked you to meet him here before?"

"Not a man—a boy have."

"What boy?"

"Jim Drake's boy."

"Who is Jim Drake?"

"The blacksmith."

"Did you meet young Drake?"

"Not me!" with a pout and a toss of the head.

"Why?"

"Becos' I didn't want to."

"Oh! then I may take it that you do want to meet me?"

Annie hung her head.

"Perhaps," said she, instinct teaching her to avoid absolute confession.

Her companion's hand slid through her arm, and his head bent towards hers.

"Do you know that it is wrong to meet me?"

She considered. "We don't do nothink wrong," she said slowly.

"Then you think it is right?"

She coloured and did not answer.

"You tell your mother, of course?"

"No, I don't."

"Why?"

"Becos' she'd stop me comin'."

"Exactly; so you see you do know it is wrong."

"Then you shouldn't ast me to come," said she, rather grievously.

"That is one to you. Well, Annie, we must allow that it is wrong for you to meet a man you know nothing about."

She stopped, and turned the big blue eyes on him, eagerly.

"You could tell me who you are, an' then I'd know."

He laughed, and drew her on.

"What is your private impression of me? For what do you take me?"

A long, long pause.

"Come, now, for what do you take me?"

"I—I—takes you for—gentry."

The answer tickled him so much that he stood still and shouted with laughter.

"I am afraid that is a doubtful compliment. You mean you take me for a gentleman. Why?"

"Becos' you looks like them as stays at Lord Kennarven's for the shootin'."

"Thank you. Well, I must set you straight if you think I am a 'lord.' I am not even connected with one, as far as I know. And, Annie, l-o-r-d spells 'lord.'"

"I knows that."

He winced at the superfluous "s." "But you make it 'lard.' Say it after me."

She said it correctly.

"Don't forget that, will you?"

She shook her head, and never did forget it. She said the word correctly to the end of her life.

"I think I should like to teach you English, Annie, but at present it is much more necessary for somebody to teach me Italian."

"What's that?"

"I can't tell you now. It would take too long."

"No, it wouldn't."

"Very well. Italian is the language of the people of Italy. Are you any the wiser?"

She shook her head. "Why should you want to learn that?"

"I really could not make you understand."

"But who *are* you? Do tell me."

"You are a very woman, and curious. I have told you I am not 'gentry.'"

"But I don't believe you."

"I am sorry. Will you believe me when I say that I have to earn my living?"

"Go along with you!" said the girl pettishly. "You're pokin' fun."

"I am not. I have to earn my living just as surely as has your father."

"That ain't true. Why, your hands is like any lady's."

"Rather brown for a lady's just now, Annie. Still, I do not expect to earn my living with my hands. Providence

settled my 'calling' without any trouble to me—gave me, so the wise people say, a fortune. I carry it about with me."

The girl opened her eyes in astonishment. "What!—money?" said she. "Ain't you afraid o' losin' it?"

"Not money. Of that have I very little."

"Then what is it? Oh, ain't you a tease!"

"Look at me, and see if you can find out."

She looked at him in all seriousness.

"Tisn't your face," said she thoughtfully, in some way connecting him with the old rhyme, at which he burst out laughing.

"Why, no, that is certain," said he.

"Tho' I don't know but what—" and here she stopped, her very expressive eyes filling in the sentence.

"Though I am not altogether bad-looking? Is that what you mean?"

"Not at all bad-looking," said she heartily. "I thinks you're very nice."

"Write me down middling. I am not so good-looking for a man as you are for a girl: but certain it is that I must not rely upon my beauty to keep me. No, my fortune is not in my face. It is a very delicate and touchy fortune, I can tell you. Why, even a bad cold could make a beggar of me!"

"Now you *are* pokin' fun," said she, with tears in her eyes, "and you won't tell me nothink."

"Nothing, Annie; believe me there is no 'k' in 'nothing.' If you cannot take my word for that, please get one of your little brother's spelling-books and look."

She was standing with her back to him, wiping her eyes.

"I say, don't cry. Here's the last tree. You go and get the milk. I shall go on now. Good-night."

"Oh, I'll be back in a minute," cried she hastily, "I am not cryin'. It's something in my eye. You'll come back, won't you?"

He laughed, and waited for her.

Midway through the wood they thought they heard someone coming, so plunged among the bracken and tangle, out of sight.

"Sit down," whispered he, "behind that tree. That's right. If anyone sees me, *you* are invisible. What's the matter?"

"I've got a thorn in my thumb."

He took her hand, and carefully drew the thorn out. While he was doing this, Annie was trying to make out some hieroglyphic signs on his sleeve links.

"Oh!" said she suddenly, in great delight.

"What's up now!" said he, busy with the thorn.

"I've found somethink out."

"I wish you would leave something out, Annie. I mean that fearful 'k'! 'Thing,' my dear child, ends with a 'g.'"

"Oh, bother that! Your name begins with a 'L.'"

(He groaned.) "Now, don't it?"  
 "Perhaps it *do*," said he resignedly. "This is infectious. When I return to civilisation I shall have to invest in a Lindley Murray. All my recollections of him are getting mixed."

Annie was busy with the links.

"There's *two* L's!" said she excitedly, "one upside down, an' there's one 'A,' besides two little letters done different. Your name can't be all that."

"No. You are no nearer my name than you were before. These links are Chinese!"

She looked immensely disappointed. "Then your name don't begin with 'L'?"

He did not satisfy her.

"Never mind my name," said he briskly; "it could do you no good to know that. Look here; after to-morrow I must be off. I will come to-morrow, just to bring you a keepsake and say 'good-bye.' Good-night, little girl, and trot off home."

She went home, met him again the next night, had her keepsake; but—the "good-bye" was somehow further delayed; and evening after evening, as the level sun-rays pierced the dark shafts of the pines, they reddened the figures of the man and the girl moving dreamily side by side as through an enchanted land. Verily, to the girl it was enchanted. For the most part silent, she began to understand that there was something in her which might have spoken had culture shaped it to utterance. Familiarity with her new companion did not bring with it the usual contempt. She could only deplore her own inferiority—only wonder at the condescension of this being from another sphere! To think that he should trouble to shed the light of his countenance upon *her*! She ceased to remember how long she had basked in that light, ceased to ask herself what she should do when the light was withdrawn. Thought of herself as compared with him she had none; care for herself as separate from him she had none. To be with him, to be something to him, no matter what; to watch him dumbly, as a dog watches; to love him dumbly as a dog loves; to feel that the very life, that solemn God-given life of her,

was his to cherish or to trample on as he chose. Oh ! it was pitiful, but it was all grim reality to Annie Deane.

And he ? He knew it, he could not help knowing it, and—he held all women so lightly !

Thus, day by day, they two, the girl of sixteen and the boy of one-and-twenty, drifted nearer and nearer to the brink of a precipice, which to a woman means—ruin. Not all at once. At first unconsciously, then fearfully, then foolhardily, until with a leap and a gasp one of them was—*over* !

## CHAPTER III

"GOOD-BYE!"

A FEW days more, and Annie Deane's enchanted land was common earth again.

"This will never do," said the magician to himself one evening as he went by the old way to the old meeting-place. "The thought of it is growing to be something like a nightmare. I never dreamed of having a thing like this to answer for. I would give my head to undo it. It is ba—vile—ghastly! It admits of no excuse; it is indefensible."

The more he thought of the girl, the more irritable he grew. She had lain a damping hand upon his brilliant prospects, had started him handicapped by putting him on bad terms with himself. He could only marvel that he had ever given her the opportunity. He did not know for whom he had the greater contempt—for her or for himself.

"If I had ever been a cad of this description!" he thought as he went along, "I could understand it; but I have not. I may not have been more than a negative virtue, but I have never been a vice."

Alone as he was, the blood mounted to his very hair. His own words kept ringing in his ears: "It admits of no defence; it admits of no excuse." He went a little farther, and told himself that the man who could do a thing like this was *not* a man, he was a coward and a cad!

The words as applied to himself stirred all the manhood in him. He writhed at them, trying to beat them off. Oh, great Heaven! What could he do to get his manhood back; to once more stand well with himself; to steadily look himself in the face? Defence or apology being out of the question, what remained? Reparation?

He paused, leaning against a tree. His agony of mind was so great that the beads of perspiration broke out upon his forehead.

"What shall I do?" he muttered. "Shall I keep my self-respect at the expense of my future? Shall I? What does

that mean? Let me look this fairly in the face. There are two roads open to me—only two. I must desert her, or I must marry her. Marry her? Put her arms about my neck for ever? Take her everywhere; leave her—nowhere? Be chained to her night and day? God! what a weight and what a fetter! And what a fool I should be to take it on! What is there in the girl to repay me for such an enormous sacrifice? Nothing. I couldn't afford to educate her; no, nor to keep her mere body and soul together. I have not enough to keep myself, to say nothing of a wife! And such a wife! I couldn't stand her for six months; and in a very little longer than that she would discover that she couldn't stand me. I should have ruined my own chance of happiness and hers too. No, I cannot marry her. It would be simply a huge sacrifice for—nothing. I must get away as quietly as possible. I will see the girl no more after to-night. I swear it! If there had been an ounce of resolution in me, I should have left a month ago. She could not trace me if she tried, for she does not even know my name. Pshaw! as if she would try. She will be too anxious to keep things quiet. She says that blacksmith's lad wants to marry her. Well, let him. She is worth nothing better. Any other man will do as well as I; and if not, I cannot help it. For I can't marry her—I'd as soon be shot."

He looked up suddenly with a nervous start. Annie stood within a couple of yards of him, regarding him with anxiety.

"What's the matter?" she said, going close and touching his hand with her cheek. "You looks as if you wusn't well."

"I'm very well," he said, shrinking a little from the wistful eyes. "I have walked fast, and I am hot."

"Why did you walk fast?"

"Because I was in a hurry. I will walk to the edge of the wood with you, but I shall not be able to stay to-night."

"Not a little while?"

"Well, a very little while. You see, I must get away by the train which passes here about half-past seven, and it is nearly seven now."

"Where are you goin'?"

"Some distance up the line; and I say, Annie, I'm—I'm off to-morrow, for—for good."

The hand which rested on his arm suddenly clutched it hard.

"Oh! you don't mean it?"

"I do, Annie, I do really. Now, don't be a simpleton. I have told you from the first I should have to go. Don't try

to make yourself believe that there was ever any doubt about that."

"Yes; but you can't go and leave me," she burst out piteously, "not right away, where I'd never see you agen? You couldn't do that. Whatever would I do?"

"Why, what did you do before? My dear little girl, did you think we were going to meet here every night for ever?"

She released his arm, and, stumbling forward to a tree, leaned against it, for she was dizzy and faint.

Her divinity had threatened to leave her before; but to-night something in his tone and manner told her he meant to carry the long-deferred threat into execution. She saw that he had done with her. She gave herself a minute or two to recover her breath, then she went up to him. Twisting her hands in the collar of his coat she looked up into his face, while all the youth died out of her own, and her lips stiffened and twitched, but uttered no word nor sound.

He tried to get away.

"Come, what is it?" he said, in affected surprise. "For Heaven's sake don't make a fuss. I shall come back again some day, I daresay, but we can't go on meeting in this wood for ever. In fact, I ought to have been away a week ago, and the sooner I go the better for both of us."

She tried to answer him, but could say nothing; could only cling to him in dumb despair.

He glanced at her once, and then looked steadily away, for he thought her eyes would haunt him painfully for ever. Of course, he could not hold out; he was moved by compassion to take her in his arms and hold her there until the colour had returned to her face. It was of no use, he thought impatiently; if he must be brutal, he could not be verbally brutal; he must get away—and write.

"Now, little girl, listen to me. I have my way to make in the world—what you call my living to get—and I cannot stay any longer idling about; go I must. But it is just possible that I may stay over to-morrow. If I do not, I will find a way of letting you know. Oh, never mind how; I will manage it. If you don't see me to-morrow night, you look about under this tree for a letter—this tree here, with the big dead branch. You won't be likely to mistake it."

"Yes, but if you left the letter you'd have to bring it. I could come an' meet you any time. If I brought the baby mother wouldn't think nothink, not even if 'twas in the mornin'."



"It would not be in the morning. It may not even be to-morrow at all. But I promise to write to you and to send you something. Remember this tree, and look here for your letter. Oh, you want a photograph, don't you? Well, you shall have one. There, be a good girl and let me go. If I miss this train it will put me to a lot of trouble. My dear girl, don't look like that. There, I have given you enough kisses to last you your life. Good-night."

She let him go at last. She did not speak, because she could not. The uselessness of speech came home to her with a force which alone was sufficient to paralyse her tongue. All she could say would tell this man nothing but what he already knew. If he—knowing—could go and leave her, then all the speech in the world could avail her nothing. And so—she let him go without a word or cry. She stepped out to the turf path to watch him as he went, and moved her head mechanically when he turned at the vanishing point to smile and raise his hat; but she did not smile in answer.

And in truth life for Annie Deane just then was not a smiling matter.

. . . . .

The next night, at the same time, she went hurriedly, fearfully, through a driving misty rain to the tree with the big, dead branch, making straight for it, tearing her thin skirt with the brambles, and caring nothing that her feet were soaking wet through contact with the long, coarse grass.

She beat down the thorny sprays whereon the berries were turning faintly red, then searched with frantic haste in the forest of moss and bracken which surrounded the tree. Her heart stood still with mingled hope and dread, and so very unskilfully did she search that she trod upon her letter before she saw it. She bent and picked it up—that big stiff letter—while her face turned grey, and something within her seemed to sink down, down to bottomless depths.

Then she broke open the envelope and took out the contents—a cabinet-sized photograph, a short letter written very plainly in a large, round hand, and a five-pound Bank of England note. Annie looked at the portrait stupidly.

"You ain't comin' never no more," she said to it in piteous reproach. "I knowed that last night. What do the letter matter? A letter can't do nothing for *me*."

She turned her back to the driving rain and read:

—

"MY DEAR ANNIE,—You see I could not come to-night, and it is of no use keeping you up with false hopes, so I tell you that you must not think of seeing me any more. In a day or two I shall be far away from here, far away from England even—over the sea. As far as you are concerned, I shall be as a man who is dead. I put it to you like this because I do not know in what other way to show you what I mean, and I must show you somehow. I have been thinking of your sweetheart, the blacksmith, who, by your own account, is an honest fellow, and very fond of you. You told me that he wanted to marry you, but that your parents thought you too young. They would not hold out if they could see that you were willing to marry him. Now, Annie, suppose I beg you to let him have his way, and to do it at once? It would be the very best thing for you, perhaps the only thing which could save you from endless trouble. I beg of you to understand this, and to remember that it is really the one safe road open to you. The paper I have pinned to this is a bank-note. Take it to any large shop when you are in a town and you will get five pounds for it. Take care of it, because you may want a little money some day. Don't be stupid enough to let anyone know you have it, just hide it until you see what use it is best to make of it. Above all, open your eyes to the truth of what I say, and understand that you have to do *two* things. The first is to forget me as soon as possible, and the other to marry young Drake. When you have done that, not a single living soul will be able to say one word against you. Keep this letter until you thoroughly understand it, but as soon as you do—and the sooner the better—destroy it."

She did not look as if she understood at all; she looked rather as if all understanding were crushed out of her. Once or twice she took her head between her hands as if that were necessary to keep her upright, and once she burst out plaintively, like a child who suddenly realises that it is lost:—

"What will I do? Whatever will I do?"

To that question she found no answer, and the rain blowing freshly in upon her reminded her that her milk-can was empty, and that she would be wet through before she reached the farm; so she unfastened the hooks of her poor, shapeless gown, put the portrait, letter, and money in her bosom, refastened her bodice, then went her way for the milk, still saying plaintively to herself:

"What will I do? Oh! whatever *will* I do?"

Not one coherent idea shaped itself in her mind. She did not resent the brutality of that terrible letter she carried—did not perhaps quite comprehend it yet. The only sense present with her was the sense of loss, which makes the present and the future alike a blank, and yet a blank which is keenly charged with pain. So all the wretched, abandoned child could do was to stumble through the rain on her familiar errand, and to stumble home again, hugging that shameful letter to her heart, and asking of everything merciful in earth and heaven, "What would she do? Oh! whatever *would* she do?"

. . . . .

There was one person who had appreciated the brutality of that letter, who had even exaggerated it, if that were possible. That person was the man who wrote it. He had writhed at every word, like a worm that is severed by the gardener's spade. He had brutalised it purposely, because he had felt that the girl's mental hide was tough, and only to be penetrated by such coarse speech as that to which she was accustomed. Therefore he must be coarse; must make himself intelligible at any cost. He did it at the cost of his self-respect, and when he went stealthily through the haunted ways to throw that letter among the bracken and the brambles, he was absolutely *afraid*—afraid of the whispering voices of the solemn wood, of the cold touch of the misty rain, of an awful wraith whose silent footfall went in front of him, stopping sometimes and compelling him to stop; for he went in company with the ghost of his own manhood, and the thought of that cruel note and that pitiful bit of money flung down there under the tree was to him what the thought of the slain is to the slayer.

## CHAPTER IV

### "I MUST HOLD MY TONGUE"

THE autumn winds went sighing through the woods of Royal Berkshire; the children had gone on their last blackberrying, and coming home with half-filled cans, had announced that blackberries were over for that year. Another layer of fallen pine-needles crackled softly under foot, and the bracken was yellow and sere.

Annie Deane went homeward with her milk-can as usual; but she chose the road now, and as she walked she hung her head, looking neither to the right nor the left, only lifting her eyes in a shrinking, startled way if by chance some stranger passed her.

One afternoon towards the end of November she had company on her homeward way. A sturdy, dark-faced lad carried the milk, and looked down from time to time at the girl by his side.

"You're quiet, Annie," said he, when he had listened to his own footsteps for a quarter of a mile or so. "Haven't ye nothin' to say?"

"I s'pose not, else I'd 'a said it," returned she, neither sharply nor sadly, but in a tone between the two.

"You have said it," said young Drake, laughing.

"What 'ave I said?"

"Why, nothin'."

"Oh!"—her lips curved in a mirthless smile—"you've bin drinkin' vinegar."

"So 'ave you, by yer temper, seem'ly. If we can't get on better'n this it wouldn't be no good of us settin' up on our own account, would it? We've fell out a goodish bit lately."

"I don't know as we've fell out."

"Well, p'r'aps it haven't come to that; but you've bin so off-'anded, you've sort o' shunted me. I've kep' on to faather about gettin' married till he've come to thinkin' about livin' in that 'ouse up by the mill, and givin' up the Forge Cottage to me."

"And are ye goin' to do that?"

"What, take on the cottage? That's for you to say."

"How can I say, Jim?"

"You can, and you knows how. Six months ago I wanted to keep comp'ny wi' you, but your father he said you wus too young. Mine, he thinks diff'rent, and so do mother. Why, our mother wus married at your age, and 'ave never bin sorry for it, as she says herself."

Annie kept silence.

"So," Jim went on, waxing hopeful, "I've got leave to settle things, and, if you likes, we can be married and comf'table this side o' Chris'mas."

Annie still kept silence.

"Mother didn't quite like ye a little time ago, but she've come round. She says as you've looked older and settledder lately. So, as they sees it's no good tryin' to cross me, they've giv' in; and, any time you likes, our mother'll come an' talk to your mother about settin' up 'ouse. She knows as your folks 'ave got a lot o' mouths to feed, an' nothun to giv' away, so she'll do all as is wanted."

Again young Drake had to listen to his own footsteps for some minutes. At last Annie looked up.

"Jim," said she shakily.

"Well, Annie?"

"Don't let your folks trouble to see mine, nor to move to the mill on account o' me, for I can't marry ye, Jim, an', what's more, I never shall."

"Well, that's straight!" said Jim, spilling the milk by reason of a sudden shock.

"It can't be too straight, Jim. I means what I says, an' I want you to know as I do mean it. I can't never marry you, Jim. I wish I could."

"You've got another chap?" said he, halting between pride and curiosity.

"No, I haven't."

"Then why can't ye marry me?"

"I've never made ye think as I wus goin' to. I've often wondered what made ye run after me so. I've cheeked you, too, sometimes, and mother, she've giv' it me for it. I'm sorry now, Jim."

"But why is it?" urged Jim, with a suspicion of pathos in his voice. "Give a chap a reason. Things is easier to bear when there's a reason. As to runnin' after ye, a chap don't mind runnin' after a girl he wants, an' I'm sure I'd do my best

### "I must hold my Tongue"

by ye, an' giv' ye as good a home as my earnings 'd show of."

"It's all no good, Jim. There's no reason as I can tell ye of in partickler; but I can't, an' I *won't*, an' there's an end of it."

Young Drake's face was as pale as it could be, taking its sun-tan into consideration. He stopped in the middle of the road.

"Wait a minute," said he, holding Annie back, for she was walking on. "We'll be in the village directly. Let's have it out 'fore we gets there."

"We've had it out, Jim."

"No, we haven't. Why, if you can't marry me, should you wish you could?"

"What do ye mean?"

"You said that just now."

"Did I?"

"Yes, an' it was a rum thing to say. What wus it ye meant?"

She looked startled. The longest tentacle of the monster Dread, far-reaching, had begun to encompass her.

"I s'pose I said that becos' you wants me, Jim."

"I don't think that's likely. You wouldn't be likely to wish that jest on account of me."

The fear in the girl's eyes intensified. She was not clever enough to see that Jim was merely accusing her of being selfish. She fixed her eyes on his, and paled to her lips.

"I can't see any reason why you should care for my feelin's. Why should you want to marry me and yet say you can't?" persisted Jim. "Speak up, and tell me what's the matter."

She made several attempts to free herself of Jim's arm.

"There's nothink the matter," she began; but then she stopped, for her faint voice failed her.

"Well, it's a rum thing to me if there isn't," said Jim blankly, "that's all! Let me hold ye—poor little thing! I would be good to you, if you'd on'y let me!"

The rough caress, the touch and presence of the lad, so different to something she remembered, were hateful to her. She shrank from Jim, and he saw it.

"Don't touch me," she said, with a shiver, "I'm right enough—now."

"Nonsense! Look here, Annie, you're right down bad, an' it's time as your mother had the hint to take care o' you."

She gasped in sudden fright. "Oh, Jim, what do you mean?"

"Why, that you're goin' wrong in yer health. You're as thin as a rake, an' as white! I can't think how 'tis yer mother haven't noticed it. Our mother would."

Annie breathed again, and walked slowly on.

"Mother 'aves enough to do to look after the childern," she said presently; "an' so 'ave I. I gets very tired sometimes. That's what's the matter wi' me, Jim; on'y that."

"Then," said he eagerly, "here's yer chance; get away out of it."

She shook her head, and the tears came.

"I'd like to, but that's what I meant when I said I was sorry. I wish I could like you well enough to want to come wi' you an' live at the Forge Cottage. But when I thinks o' that, I feel as if I'd rather stay at home, even wi' all the childern a-worryin' my life out."

Jim withdrew his supporting arm.

"All right," he said gloomily; "that's a clincher. I've bin a fool to come so many times for a slap in the face. I take good care I don't come for another."

He quickened his pace. Annie stopped.

"Give me the milk, Jim. I can't keep up, so you go on."

She took the milk, and, stumbling to one side of the road, sat down on a heap of stones.

Jim walked on, leaving her by the roadside. She watched him, wondering if all men were alike. That other man had left her in outward kindness, but still he had left her. This man walked away in open, selfish brutality. It was simply a question of method; the spirit of the thing was the same. She rose after a while and went homeward, quickening her pace as she came within earshot of her father's cottage, for she heard a familiar sound—the fretful wail of a baby.

"Where in the name o' patience ha' ye bin to?" Mrs. Deane began, as soon as the girl lifted the latch. "Here's this baby ready to eat his fingers, an' he jest weaned; an' the others cryin' to go to bed, an' father a-waitin' for 'is supper. Who would be me, I should like to know? As well be a toad under a harrow. Look sharp, off wi' yer bonnet, an' take this child. There—there, sonny; Annie 'll take 'im an' giv' 'im 'is supper."

Annie stood patiently swaying the child to and fro—she who was just a child herself, in all but a child's freedom and gaiety. Even when her mother handed her the baby's bread and milk

she swayed monotonously still, like a clockwork figure gradually "running down."

She fed the baby with more haste than judgment—crammed him, in fact, with a view to his speedy satisfaction and quietude. Experience told her that being satisfied he would sleep, and then she could take him up to her bed, and set to work on similarly disposing of his brothers and sisters for the night. This done once more, she went downstairs, meaning to pour a little water on the leaves in the teapot, and then to go to bed herself. Her mother, however, demurred.

"Goin' to bed?" she said, "an' a heap o' socks and stockin's to mend, besides all the other mendin' an' makin'? What next, for a great gal like you, as ought to take things off my 'ands? If I'd two pairs I could get on, but I've on'y got one, so I can't let youn be idle for a 'our or two yet. Skulkin' off to bed, lazyin'! Tired, indeed! What d'ye think I am?"

The girl stood silent. She was not only tired, but ill and very wretched. Still, she made no complaint—simply sat down and drew the big work-basket towards her, longing the while for the dark room upstairs, for her one poor luxury of tears. Mrs. Deane drew a chair and sat down opposite Annie.

"Father's choppin' the bavin in the back-house," she said. "What made ye so late with the milk? Was Jim along wi' ye?"

"I met him up the road."

"Ah—h," said the mother, with a smile, "that was it, I see. He's often 'long wi' ye lately, Annie."

"It isn't becos' he's wanted, then," said Annie. "I don't want Jim. I've told him so more'n once. If he thinks I cares anything for 'im, then he can't take in what's said."

"Ye see, 't isn't likely," said the mother; "he's a steady chap, an' they're so much better off than we. I don't s'pose he thinks as you mean what you ses. Drake's people is gettin' quite eager for it. I s'pose they sees that Jim's so set 'is mind on ye that it's no good tryin' to cross 'im."

"Jim won't set 'is mind on me no longer," said Annie, clutching the table and closing her eyes. "I told 'im to-day once an' for all 'twas no good."

"Then you're a little fool!" burst out Mrs. Deane wrathfully. "Here's we as pore as pore, scarce knowin' where to turn for a bit o' bread, an' when there's a good 'ome open to ye you tosses yer head an' turns up yer nose. You'll live to repent such foolishness, my gal; an' if we wus some parents, you'd be made to marry Jim whether ye would or no."

Annie went on darning, but feeling that her mother was



watching her, she thought it best to say she was not well. Before she could speak the room upheaved, and she put out both hands to keep herself from falling.

"Lor' 'a mercy, oh!" said Mrs. Deane; "what's the matter?"

"I'm tired," murmured Annie piteously; "on'y that. You thinks I'm lazy, but they wus all awake jest after four this mornin', an' I've bin on my feet since five."

"Why, get along, then," said the mother, not unkindly. "Are ye faint? Here, child, here's the stairs; can't ye see 'em?"

Annie felt her way up, reached her room safely, and lay down among the sleeping children, very cold, and sick, and comfortless.

Mrs. Deane resumed her seat and took up the darning.

"Where's Annie?" said the father, when he came in.

"Gone to bed. There's somethin' wrong wi' 'er lately. Gals o' that age is 'ard to manage. They don't know half their time what ails 'em. But, Dan'l, as sure as I'm alive, when she says she won't 'ave Jim Drake she means it."

"Time enough for all that," said the man. "She's only sixteen. Leave 'em alone, missis—leave 'em alone."

Annie lay and listened for her father and mother to come to bed. When all was quiet she lit a bit of candle, put her hand between the flock bed and the mattress, drew out the photograph we know of, and held it against her cheek.

"It was all terrible wrong," she said, "an' I'm goin' to suffer for it bad. But to marry Jim couldn't put things right, an' I won't do it. It would be wicked to deceive Jim, an' I won't do it. Besides, I couldn't never like Jim now. When he put 'is arm round me to-day I could ha' struck 'im. No; I must bear what I've got to bear, an' hold my tongue."

## CHAPTER V

### JIM'S MOTHER

CHRISTMAS was over, and the Drake family had not found it necessary to remove to the mill. Jim had not pressed the matter of marriage upon Annie further, and the village gossips were at a standstill. That an eligible young fellow should want a girl, and not be able to get her, was a thing so remarkable as to suggest mystery and demand solution. But as January drew to a close, and the clear, cold days began to lengthen, the gossips waxed garrulous, and darkly hinted that the key to the long-standing puzzle had been found. When Annie passed up the straggling street, looking furtively from one side to the other, she was conscious of producing much ill-concealed interest. The village newsmongers turned from their doors to pull aside window-curtains and crane their necks, the better to judge of the truth of their suspicions; and when the shrinking girl had passed they rushed to the doors again to nod and make signs to each other across the road. The matter was even discussed in the little general shop, and began to lose the charm of novelty.

Mrs. Deane, absorbed in her household trials, was one of the last to awaken to the situation. She kept pretty much within doors, so the rumour which was freely circulated among the chatters outside did not reach her. It did not reach her, indeed, until the short second month of the year was about half over, and what little anxiety she had felt concerning the girl—now much better—was over too.

The elder children were at school, Annie was out with the young ones, Deane was at work, and his wife, having "cleaned" herself, set the kettle on for tea, and sat down to indulge in ten minutes' doze by the fire. The February sun was bright, but Mrs. Deane's blazing bavin twigs were brighter, and the kettle soon began to sing. The tired woman had nodded once or twice, when her head went back with a violent jerk because of a rap at the door.

"Dear, bother! who's that?" said she testily as she went,

yawning, to lift the latch. "Lor'! Mrs. Drake; come in, do."

Mrs. Drake went in, and sitting down, took her big cameo brooch out of her shawl, and laid it on the table, thereby showing that she intended to stay. Mrs. Deane was surprised, but flattered.

"You're all alone?" said Mrs. Drake.

"Yes. Deane's at work, an' Annie out wi' the children."

"Ah, it'll do 'em good. I dessay they're well wropped up. It's fortunate you are alone, for I've got somethin' to say. I feels like this: there's that bein' said in the village as didn't ought to be said if it isn't true; an' anybody hearin' of it an' not tellin' the parties int'rested isn't doin' a neighbour's part, as I'm sure I likes to do myself, an' expects other people to do by me."

Mrs. Deane sat down and opened her mouth, but said nothing.

"The first I heard of it was a little better'n a month ago; an', though I won't deny but what it give me a turn, knowin' you so well, an' thinkin' o' my boy Jim, who's a good, straightforrad lad as ever wus, an' never have give us a day's trouble since he got over the fever nine years ago, I passed it by, an' it went out o' my mind. But on'y last week Drake hisself says to me, 'Missis, you rek'lect what so-an'-so said to you about—', and afore he could finish I see what he meant. 'Why, that I do,' says I. 'Have you heard anythink?' 'Yes, I have,' says he; 'an', depend on't, it's near about right,' though, as I says agen, stricter people than you Deanes, an' respectabler—"

"But what is it?" here interposed Mrs. Deane helplessly. "You haven't told me what it is yet."

"I'm comin' to it. Of course, our Jim's a good lad, though I say it as hadn't ought; but, no matter how good a lad is, gals must take care o' theirselves, or things'll happen as it's best shouldn't happen. Old married folks like us, Mrs. Deane, knows all about that."

"Will you b'lieve me," said Mrs. Deane, dropping her hands on her knees, "but I can't see what you're drivin' at. I can't if I was killed for it."

Mrs. Drake lifted her brows very high. "Is it ever possible?" she said drily.

"It is, though by your look you don't believe me."

"Well, if that's true, I'm a'most sorry I come; but I must say, Mrs. Deane, that if Annie had been my gal, I should ha' seen how things wus a long time ago."

"Annie?" the mother said stupidly; "our Annie? Why,—what d'ye mean about her? I knows she've not bin well—very peaked and poorly; but if you've come to show me my dooty to my children, Mrs. Drake, let me tell you as I do that as well as circumstances 'ill let me. They might look better if they lived better, but wages is little and victuals is dear. They haves the best I can give 'em, Mrs. Drake."

"I'm not talkin' about that, my good soul. When you says as that gal isn't well, do ever you mean that you can't see what's the matter wi' her?"

And then something came into the mother's innocent mind which for the moment stunned her, as one is physically stunned by a blow on the head. She was recalled to immediate matters by the kettle, which boiled over, causing Mrs. Drake to cough violently by reason of the sulphurous smother it made. By the time she had recovered her breath, Mrs. Deane had risen to the situation, and was ready to defend it.

"I'm much obliged to people for scandalisin' my gal behind 'er back," she said; "it's neighbours all over, that is. But they better mind what they says, for Deane's a quiet man as ever lived; but 'e wouldn't stand by quiet to hear 'is gal spoke bad of, an' anyone as did it 'd find theirselves mistook. There's nothun wrong wi' our Annie, ye may take my word for that. Growin' gals is offen weak an' out o' sorts, as I own she 'ave bin an' is now; but a better gal isn't to be found for miles round—no, nor a prettier, Mrs. Drake. P'r'aps *that's* why folks can't let her alone."

Mrs. Drake smiled, and said she never had set herself up to be a judge of beauty, and that as long as her Patty behaved herself like a modest girl should, she was quite content to leave the good looks to other people. Everybody knew that "handsome is as handsome does," and she, for one, wouldn't say "Thank you" to be the mother of a pretty girl; she had always thought this to be a position fraught with so much responsibility. Having delivered herself of these opinions, she rose and put on her shawl.

"I'm sorry you haven't took my meanin' kinder," she said, with the pin of her brooch between her teeth; "but in case you should find what I tells ye to be right—an', mark my words, it *is* right—I'll say what I meant to say, 'cos we, Drake an' me, 'ave felt a bit put about ourselves. Now, jest you speak to your gal on the quiet. If all's right, why, so much the better, an' there's no 'arm done; but if there is anythink amiss, an' anybody belongin' to us is to blame, why, then, Drake an' me

will do what we can to try and put things right. I, for one, don't like to lay all a burden like this on the one pair o' shoulders. I thinks the man's shoulders is the strongest, an' should anyway take half. It mayn't be pleasant for us, but I'd like to know as we did the right thing. An', Mrs. Deane, now, or at a future time, as may be, you may depend on us to do it. I'm sorry if I've offended you. I can on'y say, as I said jest now, I wish to do a neighbour's part, as I'd like any o' my neighbours to do by me."

When Mrs. Drake had left, Mrs. Deane slowly began to prepare the children's tea. They all came in shortly, and she helped Annie attend to them as usual. But when they were all in bed she sat down opposite her husband, looking at him drearily, and wondering whether or not to tell him of Mrs. Drake's visit. She decided to tell him, and did so.

After a long, long talk they made up their minds to say nothing for a week, during which time the mother was to keep a close watch over the girl.

At the end of the week Deane said :

"Well, missis, tell us what ye thinks, for my very bread don't taste right these seven days, an' there's somethin' in the look o' the gal as chokes me off speakin' to 'er. Tell us, what do ye think?"

And the mother answered quietly:

"Dan'l, I don't think at all. I knows; an' I knows as it's true."

## CHAPTER VI

### "I DON'T KNOW"

**THE next day** the sword which had hung over Annie Deane's head for so many weary weeks descended.

The elder children were at school. Mrs. Deane shut the younger ones out of mischief, and then, with more steadiness than might have been expected of her, asked Annie for the truth, half hoping, after all, to hear a bewildered denial of the whole thing. No denial came. Very quiet, very white and wretched, Annie heard what her mother had to say, standing the while with tight-clenched hands twisted in the skirt of her gown, and with eyes fixed on the bit of pale sky she could see through the slip of a casement.

When her mother begged for the truth, she stood unmoved; when the poor woman broke down and sobbed, she stood unmoved; when the sobs gave way to bitter and vehement reproach, she stood unmoved; but when it came to the all-important question of identity, she opened her pale lips and answered with the air of one who had long since prepared such answer:

"I—don't—know."

"What?" said the mother, in angry impatience. "Don't make me any such foolish answer as that agen, or you'll be sorry for it! How dare ye stan' in front o' yer own good mother an' tell her such a wicked thing. Tell me straight out—who is it?"

"It is true what I said. I don't know."

Checking herself with difficulty, the mother passed the exasperating answer by.

"Mrs. Drake come to me and spoke very fair. She offered to try and shut people's mouths. It's a sad disgrace, an' if Drake's people 'ad turned their backs on ye, it wouldn't ha' bin to wonder at. But they're very right-thinkin' folks, an' both she an' Drake'll try to make Jim stan' by ye, an' hush it up as well as they can."

She showed some feeling now. Her eyes came down from

the patch of sky and met her mother's for an instant ; her lip curled in supreme contempt.

"*Jim Drake !*" said she scornfully, and the mother saw at once that it was not he : which made things worse. In the thought of Jim had lain a certain amount of comfort, a hope of escape from the deepest depths of village scorn. Jim and Annie together would have to live the scandal down. Now Jim walked out of it with clean hands, leaving the girl to face it alone. There was no one else to whom Mrs. Deane could turn, and she plied the girl with questions unavailingly. At last, fearing to trust herself, she turned away in despair.

"Get out o' my sight," she said, "or I shall never be able to keep my 'ands off ye ! I must leave yer father to deal wi' you."

Deane tried to get out of it with all his might.

"What can I do?" implored he helplessly. "Gals is the mother's business, specially at a time like this."

"Or any other time that's a time o' trouble," said she bitterly. "Trust a man for givin' the woman the dirty work to do."

"But I dunno how to get at her, missis. How do I know what to say? It's the worst stroke o' luck we've ever had, an' I dunno how to deal wi' it. What does other folks do? It seems to me as I've heard they sends the gal right away."

"Tell me where? What friends ha' we got to take her? It's very well to talk of sendin' her away, wi' no money an' no friends. No; what we've got to do is to find out who's to blame. You must frighten 'er into tellin' us that."

So the father, with even a blush of awkwardness on his weather-beaten face, went in to the girl and begged her to tell him what it was imperative they should know. She hid her face from him, but kept silence.

"Don't mistake us," he said patiently. "We're terrible cut up, but we won't turn our back on ye if on'y you'll tell us the truth. We'd sooner ha' followed you to the grave; but there's no use talkin' o' that now. As soon as we can get turned round, we must see what can be done; but afore we can do anythink at all, o' course we must ha' the whole truth right out."

She rocked herself backwards and forwards, but said nothing. "You'll gain nothink by obs'nacy," he resumed. "You'll on'y harden us agen ye. O' course, if it comes to that, we can find out easy enough. The world ain't so big but what a man's to be found if he's in it. Still, we're lookin' to you to tell us who he is."

She held her peace. Her father went closer to her.

"No defiance," said he, "'cos' that I won't 'ave. Ye've done enough wrong without aggeravatin' it by defyin' yer father an' mother. Now, d'ye hear. What I wants is a man's name."

She moaned to herself, but did not speak.

"All as I 'as to say is—give me that man's name."

She moaned again, with her face hidden.

He drew her concealing hands away, and held them in one of his.

"Now, tell me that name."

She moistened her lips, and tried to free her hands. "I—I—"

"What? Come on, now."

"I—I—can't."

"Don't say that agen. You can, and you shall."

Her face was grey, her teeth were chattering with fear, her hands were swelling with the vice-like grasp on her wrists. Her father had never beaten her, but she had seen him beat the boys, and physically she was a coward.

"I'm waitin' for that name."

Her lips formed the answer inaudibly.

"What did ye say?"

"I—don't know."

"None o' that, or you'll get my blood up, an' I shall do what I shall be sorry for. Now, dare say that agen. Tell me that man's name."

"Father, I *don't* know."

"What?"

"I—I—" she stopped, afraid. Deane was losing his self-control, and his face showed signs of the storm within him. He rocked the girl to and fro by her hands, then suddenly brought her forward with a jerk, which closed her chattering teeth upon her lip, staining it with blood.

"Dare tell me that lie agen! Tell me the truth."

She tried to free one hand, but not being permitted, patiently stooped her mouth to the sleeve of her old dress, and left a red mark there. Deane saw it, and freed her hands. She wiped her lip, then rubbed her wrists hard and slowly. They were very painful.

"I'm waitin' for the truth."

She edged back to the wall as if for protection. Her father followed her.

"Are ye deaf? or are ye a fool?"

She leaned against the wall, patient and dumb, the blood from her bitten lip slowly outlining it with red.

"Will ye answer me?"



"I—have."

"You haven't. I ast ye for a man's name."

She put her trembling arm in front of her face.

"I told ye what I could, father. I did, for truth," she said, with a flinch at every word.

"You told me a lie."

"It wusn't, father; it wus the truth."

"I say it was a lie, an' not on'y that, but a foolish lie—a hardened, wicked, cursed lie!" cried Deane, raising his voice until the small stock of household glasses on a shelf near rang.

"Wus it that lad o' Drake's?"

"No."

"Wus it any o' the village folks?"

"No."

"Then it wus some o' the gentry round about, an' they shall pay for it dear!"

"It—it—wusn't none o' them."

"Then who wus it?"

She pressed back hardy against the wall.

"Say ye won't tell me."

She made no answer.

"Mind, I'll make ye, for my blood's up."

She brought her eyes to the level of his clenched fist, as if she were trying to measure the strength of it, or to familiarise herself with the idea of being struck by it. The knotty veins and the white knuckles seemed to fascinate her.

"Yes," Deane said slowly, "you may look at it, an' 'less ye up an' tell me what I want to know, ye'll feel it—let the consequences be what they will."

There was silence, and then, quite suddenly, Annie lost all fear of the clenched hand, for physical weakness had mastered her, and she was growing faint. The little room seemed to be fading away, and something curious, like a tangible darkness, was weighing her eyelids down and pinning her back against the wall. She was not even frightened when she discovered that her father was holding her by the shoulders; she only felt a throb of gratitude. She was going to faint, and if he hurt her, she would not feel it. Besides, he would be startled then, and would let her alone for fear of injuring her. He might be terribly upset, but he was "father" still, and surely would not be *very* cruel. But he had no idea of letting her alone. He saw that she was pallid, that her eyes were heavy and devoid of expression; but a fainting girl was a thing which had not come into his narrow experience. So he simply held Annie by the

lers, and demanded satisfaction, sometimes roughly, sometimes with an effort after self-control, but always in a way calculated to make her understand that he meant to tell the truth.

He stood thus for ten or twelve long minutes. Although she felt desperately ill, she did not quite lose her senses, and as the minutes passed she realised that sight and power of thought were growing clear again. She tried to speak, found she could not, waited, and tried again, succeeding very imperfectly; tried once more, and managed to ask if she might sit down.

"When you've answered me," said Deane.

"I'm bad, father; I'm so bad!"

"Men speak up, and tell me what I ask. As soon as you've said what ye can go."

He dropped her head back against the wall, with a feeble, almost a protest against his cruelty.

"Now, then," he said, with a jerk of her shoulders, "sharp. To the end o' my patience."

"I can't help that," she said, struggling with a choking at her throat. "I've nothin' to say."

"Ye won't say?"

"I can't say."

"How's to stop ye?"

He gasped again, and held her throat with her hands.

"Why can't ye?"

"—don't—know."

He then, fearing the effect of that exasperating answer, she lost control of herself, and burst into shrieking sobs, which he heard at her mother from the next room, and fairly frightened her.

"Here, here, go 'long out of it," said Mrs. Deane to her daughter. "I might ha' known as you'd do no good. Why, —Annie, don't cry like that! There, there's a good gal, hush up. Did father hit ye? No? then whatever is the matter? Why didn't ye tell me, an' then I wouldn't ha' put my hand to ye? Men can't never tell when to stop. Here, —this'll never do!"

During which she took the shaking, sobbing girl in her arms, maternally coaxed and scolded her into silence. Then she went into the kitchen, where Deane sat in crestfallen shame, and soundly rated him for his clumsiness and failure.

"Don't tell me ye didn't hit 'er. Ye made 'er poor mouth

It's bleedin' now, an' she's like a dead thing! As if

there wusn't enough 'arm done without that! Here's the children 'ome from school. What, Alice? what's the matter with Annie? Nothink. Off wi' yer things and 'elp wi' the dinner, an' don't ast so many questions."

The neglected dinner being ready and everyone served, the mother left her own and went back to the front room.

"Come along," she said, "come an' have yer dinner. If you cries yerself blind ye can't straighten things—now."

But Annie, though she followed her mother into the kitchen, shook her head at sight of the bit of "rusty" bacon and the savoy cabbage on the kitchen table.

"Give me the baby," said she, as well as she could for sobbing. "I don't want no dinner, but do let me have the baby."

She took the child, and commenced to cram him, as usual, with his dinner of mashed potatoes and milk; while he varied the performance by kicking up his heels and uttering an occasional crow of delight as one big tear after another fell upon his chubby hands.

Late that night, when all was quiet save for Deane's regular snoring, the mother slipped out of bed, and stole into the next room.

"Asleep, Annie?" whispered she.

"No, mother."

"Well now, there's a good girl, tell yer mother what we wants to know. 'Tisn't as if father an' me wanted to be 'ard on ye; we don't. We'll try and scrape together a bit o' money to send ye' away for a bit, an' then we'll take ye' back agen the same as ever; but we can't till we knows the truth. There's nobody to hear now. Tell mother who the man is as made ye forget yerself an' do this dreadful wrong."

And out of the dark there came the old hopeless answer, spoken steadily—

"*I don't know.*"

## CHAPTER VII

### "IN THE DEAD, UNHAPPY NIGHT"

A few days later Annie and her mother stood on the platform of the village station, waiting for the Reading train, a temporary refuge having been found for the girl by Mrs. Drake, who had proved herself a very friend in need to the Deanes in their trouble.

"Now, jest you listen to me," she had said to Mrs. Deane; "I've bin into Readin', an' I've seen my Aunt Jane. Not as she *is* my aunt, but we always call her aunt, an' that's near enough. She've always kep' a girl to help about the house, an' I knows as yours have bin brought up to work. She can do light work as long as she's able, an' when she's not—well, p'raps by that time we'll have found out what we've not found out yet. Anyways, this'll do for now. Aunt Jane Fryer is as good a soul as need be, an' very religious. Not as she mightn't be a bit pleasanter in her manner o' speakin', but I finds that to be the case wi' people as is religious—in gen'ral. They won't seem to lay to heart that honey ketches more flies than vinegar. Her man wus on the railway, an' wus run over by a goods train. I went in to see him 'fore he died. She wus that anxious about his soul that she forgot his body, so I stayed to help her a bit. I mind she wus terrible straight wi' me for cookin' him a dinner on the Sunday. She never haves a hot dinner Sundays. But I did cook it, an' he eat it, an' I've liked to think as he did, for the very next Sunday he wus where dinners didn't matter to 'im. But she *was* that huffy! She set at the table an' read the lessons for the day with her face as red as fire, an' her back as stiff as buckram. Still, Aunt Jane is a wonderful good woman! She'll do your Annie good, an' as I says, it's the best we can do for now."

As one result of this conversation, Annie stood on the platform of the village station, with a band-box tied up with string, and her other odd possessions in a red, white-spotted cotton handkerchief.

"Be a good gal, now," said Mrs. Deane, wiping her eyes,

"an' I'll come an' see ye' 'fore many weeks is over, if I can. Mind you do what's to be done all neat and clean. It's dreadful hard on *me*! for Alice *is* such a poor hand with a baby! Here's the train. Stan' back a bit. Have ye got the envelope an' the stamp to let me know as you've got there safe? Good-bye, an' mind as you're grateful to Mrs. Fryer for a havin' of ye. It isn't many as would."

An hour or so later Annie followed Mrs. Fryer up the narrow garden path which led to that lady's residence. Not an imposing residence in point of size, but exceedingly prim, and spick-and-span, and stiff in its interior arrangement. The fuschias and oak geraniums in the front parlour window—carefully tied back to little painted ladders—were stiff; the netted curtains were stiff; the tables—a round one in the middle of the room, a collapsible one with leaves at one side—were stiff; so was the horse-hair sofa, so were the chairs. The framed photograph of a sailor, mounted upon cloth and surrounded by British flags laboriously copied in coloured wools, was stiff; so was the uncanny-looking "Genealogical Tree"; so was the pile of musty books—all theological and desperately dry—which adorned the side-table; so was the case of ghastly wax flowers which adorned the centre one. Annie involuntarily drew herself up. Mother was always chiding her for "stooping." She felt that this would not be necessary here. The very atmosphere of Mrs. Fryer's front parlour would keep her upright. She followed her new friend into the little back room in a silence so profound that the clock as it ticked seemed to be taking a liberty. Annie half expected to see Mrs. Fryer go to the wall and stop it. No disorder, nothing out of its proper place, no children—no sign of anything young or lively! Annie's heart sank, and her eyes filled for the twentieth time that day. When she had taken her band-box upstairs, and had found her way down again, Mrs. Fryer announced that she was going down the street to the grocer's, and that she would be obliged by Annie watering the front garden; but she must please not to make a slop, and on no account must she talk to the neighbours.

The girl carefully carried out her instructions. When the garden was watered, Mrs. Fryer had not returned, so her charge moved reverently about the front parlour, and, having examined the various objects of interest, thought she might look at the books. At the bottom of the pile was a Family Bible, then a "Life of Christ," then the "Sermons" of a defunct divine, with a "Memoir" of said divine by another divine, then Watts' "Hymns," then Keble's, then the "Pilgrim's

Progress," with illustrations which haunted Annie every night for many a week after, then Venn's "Complete Duty of Man," then Sturm's "Reflections," then a tiny Book of Common Prayer, and the "Christian Year." The "Reflections" being somewhat attractively bound in bright blue and gold, Annie opened them, and was immediately fascinated by the frontispiece, in which a gentleman in a high black "stock" and irreproachable pantaloons is inviting a lady in short sleeves and a bodice only suitable for a ball-room, to go with him into "some flowery valley and there sing a hymn of praise."

The incongruous nature of the illustration did not occur to Annie. She only thought how easy it must be to sing hymns of praise in such a lovely place as this elegant pair had all to themselves, and how easy it must be to be good when all the good things of life were showered upon one in profusion. She turned over the leaves to see if there were anything said about the elegant pair, but found there was nothing, and put back the book. She next tried to get at the Family Bible, and succeeded at the cost of a fright. The pile of heavy books held a set of japanned trays in place against the wall. The books being disturbed, down came the trays, with a bang and a clatter peculiar to tin trays and to no other articles under the sun.

"Good gracious!" cried Mrs. Fryer, running up the garden path; "what's that?"

Ashamed and startled, Annie restored the side table to its accustomed order, while Mrs. Fryer looked on.

"I'm not sayin' that I mind you lookin' at a book," said she; "for there's nothing but *good* books in my house; but still, it's always safe to *ask* first. To touch things without leave is to take a liberty; but *that*, I daresay, you didn't understand."

Just at first she did not, but comprehension of such matters soon developed in her. Her life with Mrs. Fryer was not a happy one. She was not imposed upon, nor hard-worked. Being a good worker, clean and quick, she gave satisfaction in that way, and was even anxious for more to do; but Mrs. Fryer had two causes of complaint. Annie seized every opportunity to creep away—when she cried herself stupid and ill—and she would not *talk*.

"I shall get it all out of her, never fear," Mrs. Fryer had said to Mrs. Drake. "She will tell me all about it when she gets a bit used to me."

But all the artful "pumping" in the world took Mrs. Fryer no nearer to the truth: which was exasperating to the common

female mind. When the woman found that all her questioning was useless, her sympathy became blunted, then wore quite away; and as her feeling towards the girl could not remain stationary, it quickly developed into dislike.

"You're no innocent," thought Mrs. Fryer grimly; "you're deep, and about as deep as they make 'em."

Feeling herself disliked, Annie grew dull and wretched. At a time when most women are gently dealt with, she was left to feel her way along a path beset at every step with the terrors of the Unknown. What those terrors meant to the girl only she knew; what the long and lonely nights were to her she could not have told anyone. If a young head ever turned grey with fear, then had Annie's been grey indeed. Accustomed from her childhood to sleep with children—to feel the warmth of child-life on her arm, the stir of child-life all about her—to wake up now in the dark, alone, and hear nothing but the solemn, mysterious "buzz" of absolute silence was torture, such as had surely sufficed for the girl's punishment, had she had no other.

For the first two or three weeks she said nothing, only tried to conquer herself, to fight against the terror which seized her when she woke after her first brief sleep, and realised that for four or five interminable hours she must lie there listening to the creaky sounds in the bare, dark room, while her heart beat so that it shook her whole frame, and the bed on which she lay.

"I won't have another night like this," she would moan to herself as she lay huddled under the clothes. "It'll do worse than kill me—it'll drive me mad."

But the grey light would faintly outline the window-panes once more, and Annie's poor heart would gradually slow down. Daylight was coming, and the phantoms born of the darkness would glide away. Then, worn out, the girl would sleep heavily until Mrs. Fryer's sharp voice awoke her with a start.

Still, she said nothing of these terrible nights. With the sunlight lying brightly over everything, it was not easy to keep the realism of them alive; and but for a sort of mental dulness which grew upon her day by day, she might have doubted the existence of the phantom army which mustered in her dark room every night.

"If I say anything to *her*," she thought, as she went wearily about her work, "she'll only tell me I'm wicked to be afraid o' the dark. If ever I knows any poor soul who's got to be by theirselves at night, I hope I won't forget to help 'em through if I can."

The time came when silent endurance became impossible. One night at the end of March she woke from a ghastly dream, streaming with cold perspiration and shaking in every limb. The wind was blowing a hurricane, and a waning moon gleamed out from masses of scurrying cloud. It seemed to Annie that the very fiends were loose, and shrieking to be taken into human pity and shelter. She lay for a moment in stupid fear, wondering whence came those awful cries. She told herself it was only the wind, and surely that was nothing to be afraid of. But what *was* the wind? And then there came into her mind a thing she had once heard said by a preacher who should never have been permitted to preach to the ignorant. He, indulging in language of the flowery order, had tried to impress upon his audience the existence of a devil of the material sort, and had alluded to him with bated breath and upraised hand as "The Prince of the Power of the Air." The terrible sounding sentence, together with the solemn-grotesque imagery it conjured up, had taken firm hold on Annie's childish mind; and ever since then the howling of the wind had suggested to her the very presence of the Evil One and his flying satellites. As a fresh blast smote her chattering window afresh, that old "bogie" of her childhood, oddly mixed up with Apollyon, *plus* two horns and a luxuriant tail, started into fresh life and unhinged her altogether. Her hair lifted, and cold hands seemed to be pressing upon her face. Too terrified to move, she burst into a blood curdling shriek, which echoed through the tiny house, and resulted in the sudden appearance of Mrs. Fryer, struggling with a sputtering candle and a red flannel petticoat.

"Dear, dear!" cried she, stumbling over the petticoat, and thereby extinguishing the candle; "what's the matter? You woke me out of a beautiful sleep, and have given me palpitation o' the heart fit to kill me! An' now the candle's out, an' no matches handy! What on earth made you scream like that?"

"There's somethink in the room," panted Annie; "I know there is! I woke up sudden, an' I see it! I felt it come an' hold my face down wi' two cold hands. Oh, Mrs. Fryer, I'm goin' to die. I'm sure I am! That thing meant I wus. Somethink like that come an' touched mother the night as gran'father died."

"To the moon with your rubbish!" cried Mrs. Fryer angrily, "and with your mother too, for ever filling your head with such foolery. Here, now, get into bed directly! You'll



give yourself your death, and then blame it on to something which never happened. I declare you've frightened me out of my wits !”

“But not like I'm frightened,” moaned the girl ; “an' ev'ry night's the same. Nobody knows how I tries not to be afraid, but I *am*. It's no good sayin' I'm foolish. Nights like this'll kill me.”

“The fact is, Annie,” Mrs. Fryer said severely, “your conscience is at work with you. If you was to up and tell the truth, you'd be able to sleep fast enough. You can't hide away from God, Annie. It's Him that speaks to you in the dark, and until you've confessed, He won't let you alone.”

Colder than ever went Annie.

“Let me dress,” cried she, in terror. “I'll come an' sit in your room—I'll sit outside, or anythink—on'y let me know as there's somebody near to speak to.”

“Well, then, come into my bed. I can't have my night's rest broke into like this for your nonsense !”

So Annie lay shivering beside Mrs. Fryer, while that excellent person pointed out to her the sinfulness of concealment, and the certainty of consequent suffering. Annie began to wonder if concealment of a sin were worse than the sin itself. Mrs. Fryer's sermon seemed to point that way. But much as the girl might wonder whether or not she ought to confess, she had no intention of doing so. She could not have said why, but she *felt* why. To keep *that* part of her trouble to herself was her one gleam of comfort in the matter. Deep down in her heart was the image of the man who had deserted her, and she would have suffered martyrdom rather than have dragged that image forth to desecrate it in the light of common day. Her nature, slow to receive impressions, was extremely tenacious of them, once received.

But for her meeting with that nameless man, she might have gone through life as maiden—wife—mother—all of the very ordinary kind. Awakened by that meeting with him to feeling—to love—to passion—to abandonment of Right, and surrender of Self—all in one breath as it were, she had not yet found her level again. Further mental or moral progress was for the time arrested. She was still a very child in her ignorance. Ruined for ever in the world's eyes, she had yet to learn what this meant, and, having learnt, to resent it with all the might of a nature which was narrow, and which education had had no chance of widening. But it is just this kind of girl who sometimes stops at her first slip and goes no further. The narrow

mind narrows the sympathies, and keeps the heart from straying any more for ever.

What with her fright and her real desire to conciliate Mrs. Fryer, Annie had hard work to abstain from part confession as she lay shaking there that night. She wanted present kindness, present sympathy, and she felt that if she confessed these things would be hers. Also, if she *did* confess, *he* would not suffer! None of her people could trace him unless by means of his photograph. Annie lay pondering these matters while Mrs. Fryer admonished, threatened, and drew graphic sketches of terrible punishments ahead. But pondering produced no confession. At last Mrs. Fryer grew weary, likening Annie's heart to that one of Pharaoh's; and then she abandoned herself to sleep, while over the Berkshire town the dawn rose, chasing the silent night-army for a few more hours, and shutting Annie's secret more tightly than ever within her breast.

Throughout that day Mrs. Fryer was frigidly severe. She had a bad headache, consequent, she said, upon the breaking of her rest.

"We will go to bed early to-night," she remarked at tea-time; "for I had next to no sleep at all last night, and no more had you."

Annie whitened at the thought of the long night ahead.

"Am I to sleep with you?" she said.

"No; you must sleep in your own room. If you will not make a friend of me in one way you can't expect to in another. Now, I hope you will go to sleep like a sensible girl, and not let us have any nonsense about cold hands and the like. It's downright story-telling."

"It's dreadful truth," said Annie ruefully.

"Then what you see is sent to make you a better girl, and I hope it will have that effect."

White as a sheet went Annie.

"If you was to know what it is," she faltered.

"I'm thankful to say I don't. Night is as safe as day to the Lord's people."

"It isn't that," the girl said hurriedly, "it's jest *use*. I can't sleep becos' I'm so used to the children. I do miss 'em so at night. Why, there's five in my room besides me, an' to be alone sends me mad. It's nothink to make game of—it sends me mad."

"Well, then, you will have to go back home."

Annie's colour came back.

"I've been thinkin' o' one thing as would get over it," said

she hesitatingly. "I've bin goin' to ast you ever so many times. It's about the baby—mother's baby. He's so good! never a bit o' trouble wi' me. He'll lay on the floor, as long as he can see me, wi' two bits o' wood, or a bit o' paper what'll rustle, an' he'll jest talk to hisself in his way, an' be no trouble to nobody. You'd scarce know there wus a baby in the house. If you'd let me have baby I'd be so thankful. I could bear the nights with the baby."

Mrs. Fryer's power of speech temporarily deserted her.

"Well, to be sure," said she at last, "I never heard of such impudence in all my life! I say nothing of the thing being ridiculous—I'm only thinking of the impudence, and the great, *unbounded* liberty of mentioning such a thing!"

"I didn't think o' that," said Annie, beginning to cry, "becos' it's on'y me as he could be any trouble to. I'd get up earlier to wash an' dress 'im. I wouldn't eat much, an' I've got a few pence as'd buy 'im a little milk. A ha'porth twice a day 'd keep 'im, wi' what I could spare o' my food."

But Mrs. Fryer was still astonished, and could only repeat that the impudence of that request surpassed anything in her experience.

Annie said no more, and at half-past eight went quakingly into her bare bedroom, trembling at the sound of her own footsteps, and ready to scream as she listened to the deliberate closing of Mrs. Fryer's door.

She threw off her things and scrambled into bed, where she spent the night at close quarters with Terror. She lay there paralysed with fear, and when Mrs. Fryer went into the room about seven the next morning she saw that here was no "shamming," the girl was mentally and physically prostrate.

"I'll leave you alone for an hour or two," said the startled woman; "a sleep will do you good."

The girl neither answered nor moved, and two hours later, when Mrs. Fryer went up with some tea, she saw that the half-rigid figure on the bed had not shifted its position. This was alarming. Mrs. Fryer condescended to be human. She coaxed Annie, she scolded her with a touch of playfulness, she did whatever occurred to her to do, and at last, in despair, made up her mind to go down the street in search of a neighbour, who was a person of experience and resource.

Having hastily tied on her bonnet, she opened the front door, and there on the step stood Mrs. Deane, with a big basket of greenstuff on one arm and the baby on the other.

"Good mornin'," said she, panting under the weight of her

impedimenta. "I come by the early train. I was anxious to see Annie."

"Come in," cried Mrs. Fryer, rather flurried; "come in. I'm really glad to see you."

She found Mrs. Deane a chair, outraged her very nature by taking the baby, and then proceeded to give a garbled account of Annie's condition and its causes.

"You see, I really didn't think that she was so frightened as all that. It seems so silly in a girl of her age, and knowing that she'll have to pluck up and get her own living, I thought it was no use to humour her to every little thing."

"Ah, that's true enough," said Mrs. Deane quietly; "but now there's a lot of allowance, Mrs. Fryer; an' our gals is that timoresome, you can't think!"

"Then I'm afraid it's through some mistake in their training," retorted Mrs. Fryer. "What a heavy baby, to be sure! You know that children brought up in the right way oughtn't to be afraid of the dark."

"Well, right or wrong, Mrs. Fryer, they mostly is, an' it's no good turnin' our backs on such fancies jest becos' we're older, an' have got over 'em. If you've shut your door at night an' left Annie all alone it's bin cruel, an' I wish I'd known it."

"I'm sure no one can ever lay cruelty to my door," said Mrs. Fryer. "I'm a God-fearing woman, Mrs. Deane; but perhaps it will be as well that you take the girl away."

Poor Mrs. Deane drew in. If she took the girl away, what could she do with her? Mrs. Fryer understood that perfectly. She did not want to send Annie away, because she was a good worker, both in the household and with her needle. Besides, had not Mrs. Drake assured Aunt Jane that if she had the girl she should not be a loser? And was not the word of Mrs. Drake a thing to be trusted?

"Well," she said, after an awkward pause, "I'll go up and let her know you're here."

She went up. At the word "mother" Annie's dull eyes took on a gleam of intelligence, but she made no further response, and Mrs. Fryer, in some trepidation, went down, and sent up the mother and the baby. Their familiar presence penetrated the lethargy which wrapped Annie about as nothing else could have done; and when the crowing baby crawled up the bed, patted her face and pulled her hair, the desolate girl gave a broken-hearted gasp, then burst into a storm of sobs, out of which at last came one intelligible cry—

"Mother—mother—do—take—me—home!" at which the

poor mother sat down and cried too, that this should be the thing of all others which she could not do.

"I've got no room for ye, child," she said, wringing her hard hands together, "an' it wouldn't do. It do seem hard to turn our backs on ye for the sake o' what neighbours 'd say; an' if 'twasn't for the childern, an' so many of 'em in the bit of a place, I'd take ye back an' tell 'em to say what they liked."

Annie turned away with a moan, but recovered somewhat as the day went on, and before Mrs. Deane left Mrs. Fryer made a great concession. In the solemn atmosphere of the front parlour she told her visitor that as she had the baby here, he might be left behind for a few days, which announcement reconciled Annie to the idea of remaining in Reading.

The baby was left behind. Annie's plate went empty that his might be full, and her cup of poor tea was often quite innocent of milk or sugar; but she went to bed with the child in her arms, and was as happy as she could well be under the circumstances.

Now, Master Willie Deane was a good child as children go, but Mrs. Fryer was fidgety, and at the end of a week had begun to feel that a baby in the house was an insufferable nuisance. But how to get rid of the baby? He could not be sent home in a hamper like any other little animal, and to request his parents to come and fetch him was to impose upon them a heavy penalty of the railway-fare order. So the days slipped by until Willie had been an unwelcome guest for more than three weeks, and Mrs. Fryer felt that her hospitality might come to an end.

"I think Willie had better go home," she said one morning, when the child had been troublesome. "It is quite time that you had a rest from carrying him about."

Annie's colour came and went.

"I don't find him heavy," she said timidly, "an' I hope he haven't been no expense to you?"

"That is not the thing. He upsets the place, and you'd better write and tell your mother to fetch him."

But Annie, though she wrote to her mother, did so in such a way that Mrs. Deane wrote back begging another week for the baby. Father's club money had emptied the family coffers; besides which, Mrs. Drake talked of coming, and would bring Willie back with her.

The child took a good bit of looking after. Though still unable to walk, he could get from one room to another by

of the zig-zag wriggle peculiar to his tribe. Also, he pull himself up by the furniture, and thus reach articles might reasonably have been supposed to be beyond His spirit of enterprise kept Annie on the alert, and morning at the end of April there came a crash in more than one. The girl was busy, and failed to keep strict over the baby's movements. Therefore, one moment him seated on the floor of the back room, the next saw advancing by means of his patent wriggle towards the doorway of the front parlour, the next witnessed him pulling up by the tablecloth, and the next found him upon his back on the floor, surrounded by the theological books in a state of demoralisation, and by the débris of the basket of wax flowers, glass-shade and all! Poor Annie! All the king's horses and the king's men could not put that horrible wax-work figure again, and Mrs. Fryer had set upon it a value quite as great and appalling. In vain Annie pleaded the baby's innocence and customary good conduct. Mrs. Fryer put him on her knee, and having made one part of his infant person dead, she sat him down upon it, and told him that he had committed something which could never be replaced on *this* side of the grave. Annie, weeping as she swept up the fragments, only hoped that wax flowers under glass-shades might be more on the other. She wrote a piteous letter home, and Deane came in hot haste to fetch Willie away. He went, fully unconscious to the last of the gravity of his offence; unconscious—impenitent. So far from making any attempt to exonerate Mrs. Fryer, he treated her firmly as one who had done him injustice.

No sympathy was shown towards Annie in the hurry and petty bickerings of the two women.

"Children would be children," said Mrs. Deane, with a resigned air, "and what was Willie but a baby?"

To which Mrs. Fryer responded that she was aware of it, that children, be they ever so young, could be taught to be good."

Annie helped to carry the baby to the station, and felt filthy and wretched as she did so.

"Well," said her mother at parting, "ye mustn't be frightened or silly, an' you must bear in mind what we owe Mrs. Fryer for havin' ye here. An' really, ye should have been Willie carefuller. I dessay she *was* put out at havin' her glass-shade broke. When things is right agen, please ye, ye'll go to service, an' then the first money you earn"

must go to payin' for that shade. I'll try an' see ye agen before long; but if I can't, why, I can't. Ye see this railway ridin' takes the very money we wants to keep us decent. Father's most at his wits' end, an' the children's feet's on the ground. If I hadn't ha' come here to-day, Ben could ha' had a pair o' boots come Saturday."

Annie hugged the baby, and gave him a sponge-cake bought coming along with her last available penny. Then the train moved off, and the girl turned away.

She looked very thoughtful as she went along, and before turning into Friar Street stopped to take a shabby purse from her pocket and assure herself of the safety of its contents. Clutching the purse tightly, she walked on to the busy part of the town, looking about for a likely shop.

"Take it to any large shop," her letter had said. She took it to the largest she could find. Here they declined to take any trouble for her, so she went somewhere else—without success. Then she tried a chemist's, where her precious bit of paper was taken from her, held up to the light, and otherwise examined, but at length handed back to her, with a tranquil gesture signifying—refusal. This frightened her.

"Isn't it *good*?" she burst out piteously.

"Oh, yes, good enough; but I cannot change it."

She breathed again and turned away.

"I'll take it to our grocer's," thought she. "They'll change it. They'll think it's for Mrs. Fryer."

The grocer's assistant knew her, and nodded pleasantly as he took the note to the desk. But the cashier looked surprised, held it up to the light, and still fingering it suspiciously, walked down the shop to Annie, who was turning rather sick with suspense.

"Am I to take Mrs. Fryer's account from this?"

"Oh, please, *no*!" she said eagerly; "it's mine."

"H'm!" He looked more surprised than before, and walked back to the desk, where he remained so long that Annie lost her head. What were they doing with her fortune? Oh, horrible suspicion! were they going to get it away from her? She went up to the desk, with her fright visible in her eyes.

"Please," faltered she, "where's my money?"

"I have had to send the note out. We banked this afternoon, and are short of change."

She stood for quite ten minutes, shaking with apprehension, while the grocer's boy went to two or three shops, and varied his occupation by reading a little sensational literature. At

last, having obtained the change and mastered the contents of his week's instalment, that grocer's boy handed Annie's fortune to the cashier, who in turn handed it to the owner. She put the money in her purse, the purse in her handkerchief, and both articles in the bosom of her gown. How selfish she felt as she walked away from the shop, thinking of mother and Ben's bare feet! Ben *was* such an enemy to shoe-leather! She was terribly hungry, but she walked on, looking straight ahead, because the shop windows should not tempt her. Besides, Willie having departed, she would be at liberty to eat a bit more herself, and could have some milk and sugar in her tea to-night.

Reaching home she found tea in full swing, the best china in use, also the plated teapot, while the centre of the table was occupied by a sixpenny "Madeira" cake. These things were in honour of Mrs. Fryer's niece, who was unexpectedly present, and of whom Mrs. Fryer thought a great deal.

Annie was severely scolded for having been absent longer than was necessary, so severely that but for hunger she would have retreated to the back kitchen and stayed there. But hunger was stronger than pride, so she ate her tea in silence, while the smart stranger held forth on the splendours and advantages of "service" in good families. The smart stranger hailed from London, which fact surrounded her with a halo of fascination for Annie.

"Oh! I'm quite my own mistress," said she, with a smile. "Talk of a shop assistant being better off than us? We have plenty of the best of everything; in fact, they'd know better than to expect us to eat anything else—every Sunday out unless there's something unusual, one half day in the week, besides a whole day once a month, and a fortnight at whatever time of the year we happen to prefer. Then every year we have a rise of salary."

Mrs. Fryer sat rigidly upright.

"You're forgetting one thing, 'Liza," said she severely. "All these things are only open to those who, like yourself, bear an unblemished *character*."

"Oh, of course," said the fortunate young person, as she dropped her eyes, "that is *indispensable*."

After tea Mrs. Fryer went up to dress, preparatory to accompanying her niece part of the way home.

"Ever been to London?" said the young lady to Annie.

"No. It's a big place, isn't it?"

"Immense. I couldn't give you any idea."



"Do you know where Regent Street is?"

"Of course. It's one of the principal West End streets—everyone knows it."

Annie coloured with suppressed excitement.

"Could anyone lose themselves in London?"

"Well, I don't see how. There are too many 'buses and cars and policemen about. Besides, you've always a tongue in your head."

"Your friends live here, don't they? What'd you do if you was ill?"

"Go to a hospital. You are much better attended to than you could be at home."

Here Mrs. Fryer came down and walked off with her niece. Annie proceeded to wash up the best china, to eat a piece of bread and butter left on the plate, and to pour some hot water into the few spoonfuls of strong tea which the young lady from London had thought it "correct" to leave in her cup. By the time she had put everything away Mrs. Fryer returned.

"My niece wants me to spend the day with her to-morrow," said she. "Would you mind being left? I should be back before dark."

"I wouldn't mind at all," said Annie.

"Then let us get to bed. You can sleep with me."

This was a good hearing. Annie slept soundly, and woke the next morning feeling much better and brighter than she had done for some time.

Mrs. Fryer left the house about eleven, having left Annie a bit of cold meat, some bread, a pinch of tea in one piece of paper, and a spoonful of sugar in another.

"There's some beautiful dripping on the shelf," she said as she departed, "so you won't want to meddle with the butter. Mind you have a fire for me by the time I come home. You may let it out now. You won't want it, working about."

To make sure it was let out she turned back, took off the greater part of the "live" coal, pushed it under the grate, and scuttled out of the smoke post haste. Annie instantly put the kettle over the remains of the fire, made her tea, ate dinner and tea together with evident relish, then cleared everything tidily away; after which she went up and straightened her bedroom, put all her things into one bundle, and was about to carry the bundle downstairs when she heard a knock at the door.

"Who's that?" cried she pettishly. "The veg'table man, I

suppose, an' we don't want nothink, but perhaps I'd better answer."

"Nothink to-day, thank you," she said civilly, as she opened the door, and then she dropped back, with a cry of dismay, for there on the clean, red bricks in front of the spotless door-step stood Jim Drake

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## CHAPTER VIII

### THE MAN WHO WAS NOT A GENTLEMAN

HE looked at the girl, and then away. Red as she was, he was redder still ; filled with shame as she was, he was full too, and brimming over. He looked down at his boots, investigating them each in turn, then both together ; but if he were looking for his voice, he failed to find it. There was a moment of embarrassing silence ; the door began to swing slowly shut. Jim put his foot on the step and kept it open.

"I wants to speak to you," he said. "Can I come in?"

"I dessay," Annie answered timidly. "Mrs. Fryer have gone out."

Jim went in, putting his hat, brim upwards, on the table. Stuck in the lining was a lovely yellow rose in a nest of brown-green leaves.

"Lord Kennarven's gardener gave me this," explained he, as he held the rose towards Annie. "I thought you'd like it."

She felt the cool leaves against her fingers, but could see nothing, so blinded was she with tears.

Silence fell between them again. Jim stood uneasily, first on one foot, then on the other, while he opened one after another of Mrs. Fryer's books. Annie stood with her back to him, wondering what had brought him there. The clock in the back room striking twelve reminded her that time was more precious to-day than usual. She made an effort and spoke :

"What brought you here, Jim?"

"I come a purpose to see *you*. I knows why you're here, an' I come to say that if you likes I'll—I'll stan' by ye—*that* notwithstandin'."

She felt her way to a chair, and dropped into it.

"Oh, Jim!" she sobbed piteously ; "oh, *Jim*!"

"Yes, I will. I've bin thinkin' over things ever since you come away. At first I couldn't make 'ead nor tail o' what was goin' on, but at last our mother she up an' told me. I found as they all thought I had a hand in it, but I never said whether 'twas nor 'twasn't so. I jest made up my mind to come an' see *you*, an' what I wants to say is as I'll stick to ye through thick

an' thin! I've got the blame; well, then, I'll take it. When I've married you, what's yourn's mine, an' if anybody's got a turn to interfere wi' *my* business, I can deal with 'em. If it's a woman, she'll have the length o' my tongue, an' if it's a man he can have the length o' my arm, wi' a fist at the end of it."

She shook her head and sobbed.

"When I talked to ye last," Jim went on, "you said as you couldn't marry me—ye wished ye could. Them there words o' yourn got hold o' me. I felt as when I could make out what they meant, I'd make it *all* out. When mother told me what was goin' on, *then* I see plain enough, an' I says to myself, 'Well, now, that was good o' that gal. Many a one would ha' took me as a short cut out o' the muddle, but *she* was above *that*.' I've always liked ye, I always shall. I can't help that, an' I ain't goin' to try. As it's *you* what's in this muddle, why, I on'y knows as I'd give all I've got to help you out. I can't say more'n that if I talks for a hour. All what you've *done* don't make no diff'rence to the way I thinks o' *you*. As I says, 'You're in trouble, an' I'd give all I've got to help you out.'"

It was not particularly well put, nor did Jim look particularly well as he put it. His hair well plastered down with oil, his ruddy flesh-tints killed by a scarlet necktie, his awkward air, and his utter lack of self-possession, he would have passed for anything rather than a hero. Perhaps he did not comprehend that there was anything heroic in the offer he had come to make. He simply felt that he wanted to give the girl he "liked" the shelter of his name and his protection. He understood that people would call him a fool for doing this if they knew, and he meant to take care they did not know, but he was not puffed up at the thought of doing something generous. Annie, however, saw the generosity with a clearness rare in her perception of things. She felt that Jim had come before her in a new light, felt that he was something much better, much higher than she had hitherto thought him. Mrs. Fryer had opened her eyes with unnecessary frankness as to her future relationship towards mankind, had told her that every man would regard her with contempt, open or veiled as the nature of the man might prompt, but always with contempt. Now here was Jim, of whose capacity for mere kindness she had never thought very highly, offering to do her a kindness which was too great to understand. She forgot her shame, she turned and looked at the awkward lad in astonished reverence.

"Who'd ha' thought you cared for me like that!" she said softly.

"Well, I do, so now you knows." He stopped a minute here and minutely examined the lining of his hat, then said steadily, "There's one man somewhere's about as will know what *we* know. Say as I marries you, I'd like to know whether I'll be called on to touch my hat to that man for—gentry."

She shook her head.

"Shall I be like to meet 'un about?"

"No."

"Sure o' that?"

"Certain, Jim."

"Do I know 'im?"

"No."

"Ever seen 'im?"

"Not as I knows of."

"Never likely to?"

"No," she said bitterly, "nor me neither."

"I'm not throwin' any doubt on what you says," said Jim patiently, "but I hope you tell me the truth o' that matter, becos' it's like this: if ever I'm likely to run agen 'im in our parts (I thinks as I know the sort o' man 'e is), why, I'll take ye an' we'll make a 'ome elsewhere. If he've really cleared out, we can stop where we are."

She sat looking wistfully at Jim. She felt inclined to go and touch him, to take his hand, or in some way try to show him that she was grateful. For she was very grateful! It was the first genuine sympathy she had met with, the first mention of any faith in her as being at all possible. With all the rest she was a thing of the past; with Jim alone was she the same, was she still *herself*, in spite of what had happened. Her mother's parting words, "You'll 'ave to go to service," had plainly shown her that between her parents and herself was fixed an impassable gulf of offence, which nothing in all her future, be it never so blameless, could bridge across. That sentence of her mother's meant that she must face life on her own account, that henceforth there would be no place for her in the cottage with the rest. So from that moment all desire to go back home had left her. She felt that she could not go back on such a different footing to the old one. She had been so necessary, had always felt herself to be a comfort; now she would have ceased to be necessary, and would be a disgrace. Mrs. Fryer also had laboured earnestly to show her that she was one set apart from good, one who, having turned aside from the straight path of duty, must be content to tread the

by-ways all her life. No human creature serenely treading that straight path would make room for *her* to walk abreast of them. This had been the burden of Mrs. Fryer's discourse, and Annie had meekly begun to accept the prospective by-ways for her own, wondering a little incidentally what sort of company she would find there. Now, here was Jim, her old despised sweetheart, preaching a totally different doctrine, which opened up to her a prospect full of warmth and light. She had sometimes felt that if anyone really cared for her, they would care still, in spite of what she had done; and now Jim was showing her that she had not been far wrong. But then, Jim was ignorant like herself. She did not want to take advantage of him.

"You're only a boy, Jim," she said, in a friendly way. "If I was to let you do what you want to do you'd be sorry for it some day."

"We'll chance that," said Jim. "I ain't afraid. I didn't come here afore I'd turned it all over in my own mind, and settled everythink as I could think on."

She got up, standing with her back to him, while the colour surged into her face and burned there.

"Ye see," she said, "'t isn't on'y me what's got to be thought of, there's somethink besides, Jim, an' it ain't to be expected as you could—could—*like it*."

"I knows," said he hurriedly, "an' I thought o' that, too; but sure I ain't such a fool as to be down on a thing for what it couldn't help. I'm ready to stan' by what I've said, for God knows I means it. If you likes to stop 'ere till they can ast us in church, well an' good. I'll get a 'ome ready by then, an' I'll come an' take ye back. I reckon when I does that as I puts myself in front o' you to take what blame there is. It's mostly the women's tongues as you've got to fear, 'an I'll do my best to keep them off ye."

Annie said nothing. Jim's goodness touched her inexpressibly, but that mention of "going back" shut up her heart even to him. No, she did not want to go back—there.

"I can keep them off ye," urged Jim again. "I don't see why you should care for a few maggin' women. If it don't matter to me, why should it matter to you?"

"I think it'd matter to both of us," she said. "I'm not thinkin' o' other people. I'm on'y thinkin' o' our two selves, an' tho' I can't tell why, Jim, I can see as plain as plain that I hadn't ought to marry *you*. You're offering to do more for me than's right, an' as soon as you'd got yer own way you'd see what a

stoopid you'd bin, an' you'd wish me anywheres out o' your way."

"I wouldn't," said Jim, with energy; "I *never* would! You thinks I'm jest a green'orn what don't know nothin'. I dessay I am, but even a gree'orn knows the gal he likes from them he don't like, an' he'll do for her what 'e wouldn't for them. If any other gal wus in *your* place, why, p'raps I'd be the first to say as it served her right; but, jest becos' it's *you*, why, I can't sleep o' nights for thinkin' about ye."

"I wonder you haven't give over doin' *that*," she said miserably. "Anybody can tell ye *I'm* good for nothin'."

"Let 'em try," said Jim.

"They will—everybody will. But, Jim, I don't want to be bad. I never felt to want to be good like I do now that nobody'll believe in me."

"I believe in ye," Jim said quickly; "an' that's jest why I wants to take ye back. I'm sure they'd have to come round in time an' own as I wus right."

"It isn't for *you* to think a lot o' me at all," she said, again turning from that mention of going back. "I can't let you take blame as isn't *yow'n*. It would be downright bad to let everybody b'lieve *that*, Jim, and I can't do it—I can't nohow."

Jim's face hardened. Annie's obstinacy began to damp him, to turn him back to that level beyond which so few of us ever manage to rise. He spoke a trifle bitterly.

"I can't think as it's the 'bad' o' the thing what's standing in the way," he said; "the truth is, you don't care nothin' for *me*. If you did, you'd marry me, an' chance whether 'twas right to do it, or whether 'twas wrong."

She winced at the truth of that assertion, as there forced itself into her mind a fatal comparison. It was so fatal—to Jim. She saw his worth more plainly than she had ever seen anything in her life, but she saw it with a kind of despair that it could not be worth to *her*. She could not like him because of the man who had for ever set up in her mind the outward and visible ideal of what a man should be.

"That's the truth, isn't it?" said Jim at length, his bitterness increasing.

"Not—not—quite," she said; "there's more o' what I says about it than you thinks. You won't b'lieve me when I says that I don't know how to say No. If you thinks a minute you'll see how easy things'd be for me if I said Yes. Say I goes wi' you, I goes into all sorts o' comfort an' friends; say I do— I

can't see nothink but hard work, an' that for strangers. But, Jim, I could be honest wi' strangers. If I lived at 'ome' with your folks, I'd never be happy, becos' I'd be afraid o' my life they'd *find out*. I had enough o' *that* sort o' dread 'fore I come 'ere. An' Jim, if by-and-by there should be somethink as—as lived to grow up, an' I see your mother a pettin' an' lovin' of it for yourn, I'd have to go down on my knees an' tell 'er all about it, or the sight o' that'd make me feel a long sight more 'shamed o' myself than I feels now."

She dropped into her chair, rocking herself to and fro, and crying aloud as a child cries.

Jim's eyes were dim, too.

"You're lookin' far enough ahead for trouble," he said; "very likely that wouldn't happen at all. An', as I says, if I don't trouble, why should you? I can see a comfortable life for you an' me, if you'd let it stop at that an' be contented."

She dried her eyes and looked at him.

"I s'pose you wouldn't tell yer mother, Jim?"

He shook his head.

"There'd be nothink gained by doin' that. She'd think I wus a fool, an' you wus worse. She'd never take to ye as long as she lived. If I told 'er *that*, she'd tell father, an' between 'em I'd have a hotter billet than the forge on a broilin' day. No; I'll know it, an' stick to ye notwithstanding, but I draws a line at tellin' anybody else."

"Becos' o' bein' laughed at for a fool, Jim?"

"Well," said Jim, "say a man *is* a fool, he don't know it for certain, ye see; but he don't invite all 'is neighbours to come an' 'elp him find out whether he is or not. He an't so anxious to have the question decided."

The girl rose, with a dignity which Jim noticed at once.

"Now, you see I'm right," she said; "after a bit you'd see that you wus a fool yerself, an' that'd be a good deal worse than the chaff o' yer neighbours, Jim."

"Neighbours be hanged!" he burst out impatiently; "as I said afore, I'm not tied to the village. I can get a livin' where nobody 'll know, nor want to know. Who's to trouble in a big place how long I've been married, or where you wus—or who—*afore* I married you?"

"There's a better livin' for you at home, Jim, than you'd find away. The people 'ere wants more than we do in the country—I means, more in the way o' food. An' you've bin used to live well—I knows how your mother looks after you.



To take you away from yer own folks 'd be a'most as bad as to marry ye, Jim ; and to do *both* 'd be bringin' ye to ruin."

He turned on his heel, brushing his coat-sleeve round and round his hat.

"Then I'm to understand as it's no good o' me stoppin' 'ere ? So I'd better go on about my business."

Annie started. That she could offer him no inducement to stay was true, but she scarcely liked to send him away.

"Don't go away angry, Jim," she faltered.

"Angry ! Where's the use o' bein' that, 'less it's wi' myself for bein' so hard to understand when I'm beat ! I on'y come to give you a chance o' settin' yerself right agen, an' if you won't take it, why, I can't 'elp that, can I ? I begin to think there's somethin' behind, some hope o' that man as you says have quite cleared out."

"I haven't, Jim ; I haven't no hope at all."

"Well, will ye come 'ome—that is, when we're married ?"

"I'd like to—I'd like to."

"Very well, then, say you'll come."

"I *can't* say it."

"Mother shall come an' see ye to-morrow, and settle all what wants to be done."

"No—*no* !"

"I'll stick to ye as long as I lives, an' I'll never breathe a word to a livin' soul."

"I'm sure you wouldn't, Jim."

"I'll never fling it up in yer face."

"I knows you wouldn't."

"I won't even ast ye to tell me what ye haven't told me. I'll hold my tongue about it to the day o' my death, unless you first begins it o' yer own accord. I'll do whatever a man can do to make ye happy an' comfortable, for I'll never take to another gal as I've took to you."

Annie shook her head.

"God bless you, Jim !" she said, in her quaint, old-fashioned way.

"I don't want no blessins' if I can't have *you*."

"Ye musn't say that."

"Say as you'll think it over, an' let me know."

"I shall think it over, all as you have said ; but there won't be nothink to let ye know about, Jim."

"You're goin' to stop 'ere ?"

She nodded evasively.

"An' how about when you leaves ?"

"I'm goin' to service."

"How long have that bin?"

"Mother said so last time she come."

"Then you've left our parts for good?"

"Yes," she said, with decisive brevity.

"You don't know what service is—better come 'ome agen 'long o' me."

"No, Jim—*no*."

"Oh, very well. I've done. P'raps some day you'll see as ye threw away what wus better worth havin' than ye thought for."

Whereupon Jim put on his hat and stepped to the door. Annie sprang after him, and caught his arm.

"I'll never see plainer what *you're* worth than I do now," she said; "it isn't that, Jim—it isn't, upon my word. Don't go like that. I'd like to 'ave a good look at ye afore you goes—you've behaved kinder to me than anybody I knows."

"That don't seem to count for much," he said, trying to shake her off, in his disappointment. "I thought it would if I kep' right on an' stuck at nothin'! I ain't much to look at, I know, not so much, I dare swear, as somebody what it's a pity you ever see, an' a greater pity that I didn't! He wouldn't ha' bin much to look at after I'd done with 'un."

She was drawing him back from the door with all her might, her face pressed close to his arm.

"Say good-bye civil, please, Jim. Sure ye needn't think you're so hard done by. You've got all as is good in front o' *you*, an' there's nothink good for me, on'y hard work an' hard words. Do say good-bye to me kind—Jim."

Jim shrugged his shoulders.

"Good-bye, then," he said, with a grind of his teeth, as the girl took his hand and held it sadly against her wet face. "God knows why I should think so much of ye—I don't. It's precious hard on a chap, I says. P'raps if I'd treated ye the same as *he* did you'd ha' liked me. That's mostly the way wi' gals."

"Don't be hard, Jim. I'll have all sorts o' hard things to bear long after you've forgot all about me, or have come to think me well out o' yer way."

Jim ground his teeth again in impotent misery, then turned on his heel, looked straight into the girl's eyes, suddenly took her close in his arms, and kissed her. Before she had recovered her breath he had swung through the wooden posts at the end of the red-bricked path.

Annie went slowly back into the house.

"There goes the best friend I'll ever 'ave," said she. "Most girls would ha' jumped at the thought o' goin' back, but I feels as I've left all that for good. Whatever else I do, I shan't go back there."

She stood a moment, still tingling with the close pressure of Jim's arms and lips, then she gave herself a shake and set to work. Having put some sticks ready for the re-kindling of the fire, she filled the kettle and stood it on the hob; then went upstairs for her bundle, tied it more securely, and brought it down, gave one last look round, put the front door-key on the ledge just inside the unlatched window, then dressed herself and departed, taking the road to the station. Here she asked the first porter she saw how long she had to wait for the London train.

"Five minutes," said he hurriedly.

"Where will I get my ticket?"

He jerked his thumb in the direction of the ticket-office, and Annie followed three or four people who were going there. Standing close behind a man she heard him say:

"Third class single to Waterloo."

She took his place as he moved away.

"Third class single to London," said she firmly.

The clerk looked at her.

"Waterloo?" he asked shortly.

"Is that London?"

"Of course it is. Don't you know which part of London you want?"

"I want to get to London by the train what gets there quickest."

"Waterloo train. There isn't another for an hour and a half."

Annie put down her money, went back to the platform, asked if this were her train, was pushed into a compartment by a friendly porter, and in two minutes was watching the outskirts of the Berkshire town glide past.

She had started for London—an atom of helplessness borne along on the current of Fate towards the mightiest city in the world, without a fear, without a thought of consequence, rendered proof to such ordinary things by the complete armour of perfect ignorance.

Quite late that night Mrs. Fryer, hot and distraught with running hither and thither asking questions of people likely

to be able to satisfy her, dropped on a chair in her back room, and declared that she could trouble no more; that the abominable girl was sure to be safe. A thing that was no good, said the worthy woman severely, never came to much harm. But throughout the night sleep deserted Mrs. Fryer. She rose early, and, by a fortunate chance, betook herself to the grocer who had changed Annie's note on the previous day. She came away from the shop in a righteous fury, and reaching home, wrote to Mrs. Drake.

"Tell her mother not to waste time in troubling about her," wrote she, "for depend upon it, that girl is born to evil as the sparks fly upward. The very same night her mother left here did she go to my grocer's and get change for a five-pound note, and every penny of that money that hussy has taken away with her. This place was not likely to be good enough for a girl with five pounds in her pocket. What I have said all along is right: there is a gentleman at the bottom of this, most likely one of the gentry round about your way. She was not likely to tell her mother or me his name. He would make it worth her while to keep that quiet."

That five-pound note which had lain for so long concealed in the bosom of Annie Deane's shabby gown turned even the heart of her mother against her.

"She had all that in her pocket, an' yet let me drag into Readin' that day to fetch the child—she let me cry over them wax ornaments, an' 'eard me say as Ben's feet wus on the ground, knowin' 'twas all becos' o' *her*! No, Dan'l, Mrs. Fryer's right. We'd best forget 'er, for she's a bad gal, an' bad'll become of her!"

## CHAPTER IX

### LONDON

IN the dusk of the spring evening a solitary little figure moved slowly along the busy pavement of the Waterloo Bridge Road—a figure at once so childish and so womanly that even here many a head turned to look after it, and many a heart gave it a second compassionate thought. Annie Deane was in London, and at present knew not what to make of it. She repeated to herself the names of the few places she had visited, and she found that such names conjured up to her mental vision something which was real, which was recognisable. When she repeated the name of her native village she could see a long, straggling street, the school-house, the church, the vicarage, the little club-house, where the vicar and his curates met such members of their flock as chose to avail themselves of secular instruction and amusement; when she said "Reading," she could see Broad Street, the Market Place, Duke Street, and the bridge over the narrow Kennet, the Church of St. Lawrence, the great cannon on its leafy eminence in the Forbury Gardens; but when she said "London," and told herself that she was actually there, she felt like one in a desert without a guide. She scarcely knew whether to laugh or to cry. Everything seemed just one great roar! Above—below—around—hurry and roar, roar and hurry. Standing on the Bridge, she looked at the sluggish brown river running far below; at the grimy, unbeautiful buildings on either side; at the black and ugly river craft creeping along; and then the unfriendliness of it all smote her sharply, and filled her eyes with tears.

She turned away from the river to look at the stream of traffic crossing the bridge, at the 'buses and cabs, the waggons and drays, the smart hansoms and dapper private carriages. She looked until she unconsciously stood still, open-mouthed, in painful expectation of a great collision. But the flying vehicles "shaved" each other with marvellous certainty, and Annie, recalled to herself by the derisive grin of a street arab, walked on. Once over the Bridge she halted, and, turning

aside from the stream of people, walked to and fro in front of some dull-looking houses—warehouses or offices, as she could see.

Nearly opposite was a big grey building, like a church or a hospital, she could not determine which. A trifle curious, she thought she would cross the road for the purpose of finding out, but the flying vehicles frightened her. A heavy tread behind made her look round.

"Looking for anyone?" said a big, good-tempered-looking policeman.

"No, thank you."

"Want to find any place in particular?"

"N—no," with hesitation. "Is this Wellington Street?"

"It is."

"Wellington Street—London?"

The policeman laughed.

"Wellington Street, Strand, is near enough for most of us," said he.

She coloured ruby-red.

"Oh, of course, I know, thank you," and she walked on briskly to join the meeting currents of the busy human stream, abashed by the amused policeman's lenient treatment of her transparent attempt to deceive him. If the Bridge had confused her, the clattering rush of the Strand bewildered her. She began to feel a little uncertain in her head.

"It's the noise," she told herself, "an' the long ride in the train. I wish I'd had tea in that baker's shop in the first road I came along. They made tea there; they'd got it up in the window. If I was to turn back, I wonder if I could find that shop agen. I knows I haven't crossed a road. I believes I could."

She turned back along the Strand, glancing up until she saw Wellington Street. Turning this corner with a joyful sense of familiarity, she quickened her pace.

The human stream was flowing more sluggishly for a time, and the strip of pavement in front of the dull-looking houses was deserted by all save one man—the same policeman who had spoken to her half an hour before on that same spot. She darted back in terror. She felt that her ignorance of the locality was patent to that policeman, and she feared his right to question her concerning her business and her destination. At the corner she turned and watched him pacing the pavement, with his face to the river. He would be sure to recognise her by the countrified bundle she carried, and of which she

was rapidly becoming ashamed. Arrived at the end of the strip of pavement, he stopped, turned, looked (to Annie's excited fancy) straight at *her*. In frantic haste she bolted to the corner of the street again, and precipitated herself almost headlong into a waiting 'bus, where she sat shaking with stupid fear. The policeman advanced until he was but a few feet away. Annie cowered in her corner, expecting to be dragged out and seized as a runaway; but just as her fright became insupportable the 'bus started with a great jerk, and in less than a moment the awful policeman was lost to view. The girl sat up and breathed again, but her heart had scarcely slowed down before a sudden and appalling thought set it off again as madly as ever: Where would this 'bus take her? Where would it stop and let her get out?

Fear of ridicule kept her silent. Already two or three of her fellow-passengers had smiled at her bundle, and then at herself, as at something unusual. She resented the smiles, and drew her bundle under her cloak. Also she resented the interest with which she was regarded by a man with penetrating eyes and a much-shaven face. She took an intense dislike to the man, which was stupid, he being simply a member of "*the*" profession, possessed of the genial kind-heartedness so common among his brethren. But for the crowded state of the 'bus, he would have asked Annie a few questions; but the 'bus *was* crowded, and he was the first to leave it. Soon after that the vehicle came to a standstill. Several people got out, and Annie, thinking this a good chance of hiding her ignorance, got out too, being first stopped for payment of her fare. She found herself standing on the pavement again, further than she had yet been from Waterloo Station, but no nearer to any place of rest or refreshment. There were three or four roads to choose from, but whom could she ask which road was hers, even if she had had any idea herself? She had *one*, indeed, but that was fast becoming confused. Taking advantage of a temporary lull in the traffic, she followed some women across the road, drifted aimlessly for a hundred yards or so, until the women turned and looked at her, then drifted back again, finding herself presently in the world-famed Square, among the fountains and the big, grim lions.

It was almost quiet here in the spring dusk, nay, it was lonely, and the vast site awed the ignorant wanderer, chilling her through and through. It was all so different to anything she had ever seen. With the loneliness of country roads, of narrow, hedge-bordered lanes, of still pine-woods, of gently

swelling fields stretching far away to the soft sky-line, she was familiar ; but here was a loneliness which was quite different, and far more dreadful. She felt small, worthless, of no account whatever. The great space dwarfed her ; the indistinct, gigantic buildings gave her the impression of being iron-built. They must have stood here, she thought, from the beginning of the world, and would disappear with the end of it. Certain it was that everything here was too grand for *her*. "London" was meant to shelter creatures of another sphere than hers. The very sky was not the same. In the country it was deep, dark blue, and starry ; here it was murky, smoky red—red with the reflection of a million flaring lights, lights which shut out the stars. The wind, rain-laden, blew across the big space in gusts. London was in for a wet night ; and a wet night at the end of April can be cold as mid-winter.

Annie faced the stinging sleet with her heart failing her, and the nerves of her lips and chin a-twitch with the desire for tears. She hurried across the big square, then kept along by the houses, letting the squall sweep by. A sick sinking—something which but for anxiety would have been mere hunger—possessed her. She was in a street now, and eagerly looking about for a shop where she might get something to eat ; but the solitary confectioner's she found closed just as she reached the door, and she was too timid to knock. She drifted on again, turned one corner after another, coming at last to a mere byeway. Here she found a baker's shop, in which she bought a roll and some plain cake, eating both heartily as she went on down the narrow pavement. She was surprised to find that the hurried meal did her no good ; it rather added to her growing physical discomfort. She began to cry in earnest and to quicken her pace, wondering where she was, and whether she could get back to Waterloo Bridge and *the* policeman. What a long time it seemed since she fled from that policeman, and how thankfully would she have made her way back to him now ! He seemed almost like a friend ; was certainly the only human being to whom she had spoken since she had left the station. She wondered if he had a home, and wife, and children ; he somehow looked as if he had. If she were to go back and find him, telling him that she had enough money to pay, would he have compassion on her, and take her and her offending bundle in ? She thought he would, and set off bravely to find her way back to the Bridge.

As far as she could remember, she had come in a "straightish" line from Wellington Street, so now, having



suddenly turned down this little street, she must be going in a "straightish" line back. Surely she had but to keep on, and presently turn to the right. This would bring her to the busy Strand again, where she would get into a 'bus, if only there were one waiting. But just now she could find no turning to the right, and the rain was driving down the street in earnest. The blurred street-lamps flickered in the whirling gusts, while the wet pavements reflected them in misty patches. Annie began to comprehend that her situation was serious. A few people, with lowered umbrellas firmly held, passed her, intent on reaching shelter; three or four boys, in ragged garments, bare-headed, barefooted, and supremely happy, came out of a narrow court, and turned "wheels" on the wet pavement just in front of her. Nearly falling over the hindmost of these, Annie stopped him.

"How far am I from the Bridge?" she said timidly.

"Eh, miss?" said the shock-headed urchin, peering up at her with cunning eyes, and touching his forelock in mock respect. "The Bridge, did you say, miss? What Bridge?"

"Waterloo Bridge."

"Oh, my eye!"

The urchin thrust his hands in two ragged pocket-holes, and danced a neat little *pas-seul* to the accompaniment of his own whistle.

"Hi, Bill! come back here and tell us the way to Waterloo Bridge. We're from the country, we are, and we wants to find Waterloo Bridge. Goin' to commit soocide, miss? Allow me the pleashaw of holdin' your bundle."

"Let it alone!" cried Annie, desperately frightened, for the grimy, grinning imps who were dancing round her looked like little devils incarnate. "How dare ye? Let it alone!"

Saying which she fought for the poor bundle, and tried to break away, but the step-dancer slipped one unsavoury arm through hers, while he flourished the other on high.

"Come along, pals," cried he; "come along of us to see the young lady from the country take a header from Waterloo Bridge, like the gal in the play at the 'Vic.', while I holds her property and engages the attention of the peeler, so as he don't rush on in the nick o' time, like the gal's sweetheart at the theayter. I say, miss, any mystery about this bundle? Let's feel, now, do."

"Get away, you little beast!" cried the girl, frantic with fright and temper. "I'll call 'Police,' if you don't get away."

"Gently, my dear," said her persecutor, with a diabolical

squinting grimace at his "pals." "I'm escortin' of you to where you wants to go. Come along, now, nice and friendly. Take my arm. I'm sorry I've not got my best togs on, and I can't hoffer you my umbereller, becoss I left it up the spout at my uncle's. I say, it's dooced wet, ain't it? Hadn't you better allow me to call a cab, 'cos at this 'ere rate we might be drowned afore we gets to the Bridge, which would make the soocide sort of onnecessary, and spoil the excitement. Have you wrote the letter to yer sweetheart? Oh, my eye, pals, can't she kick!"

"Help!" shrieked Annie hysterically. "Help! Police! Oh, where is somebody to take these dreadful boys away?"

The dreadful boys sent up shriek upon shriek of laughter, while they all joined hands and executed a wild dance round their panting, terrified victim, dodging her, and closing up together like lightning whenever she tried to break through. The rain was falling heavily, and the narrow street was deserted by all save one or two people, who hurried past, making no attempt to interfere; seeing which the urchins waxed merrier and more audacious, forcing the girl against the wall at last, where they kept guard over her for several minutes, enjoying her torture like the young fiends they were. The situation was dreadful. At last a bright thought illumined Annie's despair.

"If you'll let me go," she said faintly, "I'll give ye sixpence."

The shrieking war-dance stopped instantly.

"No tricks, now," said the arch-fiend of the gang; "stump up the tanner and we'll say 'Walker!'"

Scarcely able to stand for trembling, Annie held her wet bundle firmly under her arm, while she felt in her glove for the change given her in the baker's shop.

"Don't hurry," said the arch-fiend, who was unpleasantly close at hand. "We'll take it in silver, or we'll take it in 'browns'; we're not partik'ler, but it must be cash down, an' no credit."

Brilliantly inspired for the second time, Annie raised her hand and threw some coppers into the middle of the road. In the twinkling of an eye there was a writhing, struggling heap of dirty humanity on the spot where those coppers fell, and Annie made her escape, stumbling and running as best she could until she had safely turned into something like a thoroughfare. By this time the sharp shower had ceased. Knowing that she could not have got far from that terrible gang, the girl pushed on as long as she could, but at last came

to a compulsory stop. The hurry and rush of the past few hours, the terror of the past few minutes, the desolation and uncertainty of a homeless and shelterless night ahead—all these things were working her up to a state of panic. She had no wish to hide in dark places now, the more light and companionship the better; so she stood full in the glare of a big public-house, leaning against the ornamental brickwork of its imposing entrance.

It took her some minutes to regain her wits and her breath, then she began to understand that she was in a busy thoroughfare, and to wonder if it were the Strand again. She watched the cabs and 'buses go by, watched the ever-meeting, never-mingling streams of people, until a very heart-breaking thought turned everything into a dancing mist: out of all that human crowd she could find no single being to whom she dared go for help. True, she had money, but that was all she had to help her through a time the thought of which paralysed her with fear. She clutched her bundle more tightly as she remembered that she had a little change therein. Her gold was sewn in the bosom of her gown. That *must* not go.

"God help me!" she burst out, half aloud, "what *shall* I do? If only I could get to the station, p'raps I'd be able to get back to Readin'; an' oh, wouldn't I be glad to get back!"

She shut her eyes in pain, and saw the narrow Reading Street, the little garden-fronted terrace, the red-bricked path to Mrs. Fryer's front door. Annie thought of it as Eve thought of her lost Paradise. Suddenly giving way, she leaned against the door of the public-house, and made up her mind to stay there until someone ordered her away.

Let come what come may, she had no will left wherewith to combat Fate further; she abandoned herself to sheer fatigue and misery.

But in another moment there smote upon her ear a cry, a word which sent the blood bounding through her veins afresh, and quickened every numbing sense she had. That word was *Regent*. She grasped her bundle and started forward. The cry came from one of the 'buses which stood just across the road.

Regent—Regent—*what*? A word too long for street; a word apparently ending with "s." Too intent upon reaching that 'bus to heed even the meeting traffic, Annie dashed across the road right under the nose of a cab-horse, oblivious of the shouted oath of the driver, and only perceiving her danger when she felt herself grasped by the conductor of the 'bus she was struggling to enter at all risks.

"There, now," said he grimly, "can't you see where you're goin' to, young woman? It's your sort as hauls a man up for runnin' over somebody. If you'd ha' bin killed, it wouldn't have bin that cabby's fault."

He pushed the girl into the 'bus, and gave the signal to drive on.

Annie made no inquiry as to where she was going. She sat back in her seat, holding on to the edge of it. There were but four travellers besides the girl, and neither of them spoke to her. They looked at her curiously, even sympathetically; but she was too far gone to notice, or to care if she did notice. And by the time the leaden weight above her eyes had lifted sufficiently to allow her to look about her, she had the 'bus to herself. The conductor swung himself partly inside.

"Circus?" said he, with something of interrogation in his tone.

"What circus?" said Annie, with a vivid recollection of Messrs. Sanger on a visit to Reading.

"Regent Circus."

The girl got up.

"Where's Regent Street?" said she eagerly.

The conductor jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

"What part do you want?"

"I don't know, for certain."

"Well, what number?"

She told him. He repeated it thoughtfully.

"I think you'll find that about half-way down, on the left-hand side. What? No, I don't know the name, but you'll find it if you've got the number."

"Will they be shut?" she asked breathlessly, as she stepped out to the pavement, wondering why she trembled so.

"Shut? Yes; most likely." And the conductor, swinging round by his strap, put one hand to the side of his mouth like an open shutter, and commenced to shout for customers.

Annie went slowly along the broad pavement, trying to account for her agitation.

Was she not in Regent Street? Was she not upon *his* track? He had said he was going away, but just lately she had begun to doubt the truth of that statement. All his conduct was accounted for to her by a new theory of ignorance. It was this which had decided her to find him. His youth, his pleasant laugh, his gentle speech and manner were all so hard to associate with brutal intention.

"He didn't know," she kept on telling herself. "If he was to

know, he'd tell me what to do ; he'd find me some place to go till I was all right agen. I'm sure he would—he wus so kind. Why, he wus afraid o' me scratchin' my feet wi' the brambles, an' how angry he wus wi' Tommy that day for kickin' me ! ”

Annie's way of looking at things was a feminine way. The man had done her one great wrong, but in little things he had been kind and considerate ; and with the average woman it is the “ eternal little thing ” which counts.

She stepped out, looking up at the big numbers as she neared the one she wanted.

Up to the present the possibility of finding one shop in this maddening confusion called “ London ” had been so remote that her plan of action, should she succeed in finding it, had not been decided upon. It now became necessary to think what she should do.

Still looking upward, she stumbled on a few yards and stopped. The shop was closed !

## CHAPTER X

"L. A. LE QUESNE"

OR an instant it seemed to Annie as if sky and street had come together in one great clap of disappointment and despair. When things had steadied, she looked at the house again and saw lights in the upper windows, also a side door slightly open. She pushed it more so, finding another, half-glass, and hung upon the swinging principle. Through this she could see dimly-lit passage and staircase. In another instant she was in the passage, peering into a big glass case containing photographs, the name upon which was identical with the name on the photograph left for her under the pine tree months before. A thrill of hope revived her from head to foot. Now "London" meant more than a vast confusion. Here, where she stood, *he* had stood; here, somewhere near at hand, was *he*. All her misery must vanish if she could but lay her hand upon him. He could forgive her everything when he knew.

She walked up the passage, and stood on the bottom stair, looking up. On the sombre-tinted wall was a painted hand, the refinger extended, and "Studio—second floor," in big black letters. Annie mounted the stair and went on until she came to another door. Without giving herself time to think she opened it, and found herself in a large room, furnished with velvet chairs and a lounge or two.

"Is that you, Willis?" came in a man's voice from behind Japanese screen.

Annie did not say anything, only began to undo her bundle, wherein was *the* photograph.

"Willis!" called the voice again irritably, "is it you?"

"No," here interposed another voice, this time feminine, also from behind the screen; "it can't be, for I sent him home half an hour ago."

A gentleman stepped out from the Japanese obstruction, and, seeing Annie, said, not very civilly:

"What do you want?"

"If you please," faltered she, "if you please, sir, I—I had to—give—I means, to show you *this*, an' to ask where to find him."

Whereupon she turned as white as a sheet, and trembled guiltily all over.

The gentleman took the portrait, lifted his brows in surprise, and surveyed Annie critically from head to foot.

"Who sent you here?" he said.

"A friend of his," said she, more falteringly than before.

The gentleman continued his critical survey, then shook his head.

"To whom does *this* belong?"

"That picture, sir? Oh! that's mine."

"Who gave it you?"

"He did—hissself."

"*Who* did?"

She stepped forward and laid her finger on the portrait.

"*He* did," with an emphatic little nod, as of one who would say, "Are you stupid?"

"What—Mr.—Mr."—and here he paused, waiting for her to fill in the name.

"Yes," said she promptly, "he did, hisself."

"And yet—you don't know his name?"

She started and looked distressed.

"Who says I don't?"

"You *don't*—I am sure of it. It is quite plain to me."

She hung her head and said nothing. Her interrogator continued:

"And yet you tell me he gave you this? Really, you cannot expect me to believe it."

"But it's true!" she cried miserably; "it's quite true. He promised it to me, an' when he went away he sent it."

"Oh, now he *sent* it! And yet—did not send his name with it."

Remembering to what duplicity had brought her, Annie held up her head and spoke out:

"I don't know his name; it's true, I don't—but I knows *him* very well."

The photographer shook his head with decision, and handed back the card.

"I can do nothing for you; it is of no use coming to me."

Annie clutched the edge of the table near her.

"I wants his name an' address," she said, "that's all. You can tell me *that*, becos' you knows it."

"I know it, certainly; but I am not supposed to give it to anyone who chooses to come and ask for it. It would not

be in accordance with our custom. We are not at liberty to disclose people's names and addresses."

She looked bewildered.

The photographer put one foot upon a chair, eyeing her more graciously. It was his business in life to find beauty in the human face, and a certain share of beauty this girl had.

"I'm afraid you don't understand," he said slowly, "but it is like this:—Our customers are at our mercy, and we are obliged to be careful. Of course, when we take portraits of public people, such portraits are public property, and are even sold, but that is by permission. Now, in this case you bring me the portrait of a *private* gentleman;" he paused for three or four seconds, and watched her, then resumed, "and you ask me for his address. I cannot say what use you might make of it, you see. Besides, it would be a breach of confidence between him and me. He would have a right to think me impertinent, and he might be excessively annoyed."

"He wouldn't," she burst out eagerly, "he wouldn't be annoyed at all."

"I cannot risk it. I am not refusing you for mere unkindness. I am only following rules which are respected among us, and which we do not care to break. As I have said, it is not possible for me to say what use you might make of this information you want."

"I won't make use of nothink," she pleaded, "how could I? What 'arm could I do? Even if I wus to try, an' goodness knows as I wouldn't try!"

"I cannot say whether or not it is in your power. I know nothing of you. About giving you this address, it might be right enough, but it is a thing I cannot do."

Annie stared at him with eyes brimful of despair. His reasons were no reasons to her. She could not understand them. She could only say stupidly:

"What 'arm could I do? If you told me where to find him, I shouldn't tell nobody else. As to 'im bein' angry, he'd be glad—when he *knew*. Why won't you tell me? What shall I do if you don't tell me? I've not got no other way of findin' out."

She wrung her hands together, and spoke out shrilly in her great distress.

The photographer was beginning to be sorry for her, and to wish her gone. He perceived that she was not educated up to the point of courteously-implied dismissal. It would be necessary to give her an emphatic "No," and he shrank from



giving it—himself. He went into a tiny inner room, where his wife, with bonnet and cloak on, stood waiting.

"Who is that?" said she. "What a time of night to trouble one on business! We shall miss the 8.30 train."

Her husband threw the portrait he held on the table.

"Look here," he said, "it's the very queerest thing! A girl begging *his* address."

The lady gave a cry of surprise.

"Imagine it! A common girl, of course?"

"Oh! if you like to put it in that way, a common girl, certainly. A country girl, fresh from her native wilds, and in downright distress. She's—"

Here the speaker paused, filling in the sentence with a significant look at his wife, who responded with one of startled comprehension.

"I wish you would speak to her."

"I will; but of course you cannot give her the address."

"That *is* of course. She doesn't know his name, either."

"How ridiculous! The girl must be crazy."

Annie was standing in the studio anxiously watching that black-and-gold screen. When a lady appeared to her instead of a gentlemen, she was in nowise elated. The lady looked sharper than her husband, and spoke more decidedly than he.

"We are waiting to leave," said she; "I am sorry we cannot give you this gentleman's address. My husband has doubtless told you why. It would be interfering with his private affairs in a way that nothing could excuse."

"I can't see that," persisted Annie. "If he'd mind me knowin' it'd be diff'rent. But I know for certain he wouldn't mind, an' why can't you believe me?"

"Well, you see it is so plain to us that if he had wished you to know his name and address he would have given you both himself."

"But he didn't know I'd want," and here the girl stopped, suddenly remembering that these people knew him, and that by talking to them she was betraying him. She had no wish to betray him; she loved him far too jealously for that. "He had to go away in a hurry," she finished up, rather lamely.

"That has nothing to do with us. We only know that we should not be justified in giving you what he evidently does not wish you to have."

Saying which, she put Annie's portrait in a clean envelope, and handed it back to her.

"Besides, I must tell you that I think you are making some ridiculous, or perhaps wilful, mistake. Remember, I know this gentleman. He *is* a gentleman, and—in my opinion—would be very unlikely to have anything to do with a girl like you."

Annie had pluck enough left to resent that speech. She said, "Thank you, ma'am," put her photograph back in her bundle, and prepared to leave.

"I hope you have friends here?" said the lady then.

The girl made no answer.

"Have you come far?"

"A good way."

"Then you *have* friends here?"

The girl halted.

"I s'pose you won't tell me where to find 'im?" she said quietly, after a pause, during which she had lifted her bundle and turned to the door.

"I cannot; it would not be right, and we should be laying ourselves open to blame."

Annie nodded, opened the door, went slowly down the stairs, and out into the street. Her one hope, her one resource, had failed her.

The photographer's wife went back to the inner room.

"Wasn't that odd?" said she. "I don't remember any such thing ever happening before. Do you?"

"Never. Do you believe the girl's story?"

"No. Who could? Of course, she is in distress, but I feel sure he is not the man she wants. She has picked up that portrait somewhere, and somebody behind her has put her up to an impudent scheme for extorting money."

"Perhaps. Why should you think that it is not he whom she wants?"

"Because I believe he is not that sort of man."

"What on earth can you know of the man? I think you have seen him about half-a-dozen times."

"That is true, but then he is so friendly! You kept him waiting more than an hour on two occasions."

"Which means that he failed to keep the time of his appointment. No virtue—that!"

"Well, he apologised, and did not mind waiting. I have known people come late to their appointments, and then seem quite insulted because they had to wait. I feel sure that he *is* innocent as regards this girl."

"You judge by her general ignorance of *him*. I suppose

you are right. We have published a good many of those photographs, have we not?"

"Yes, and are still printing them. It was the best negative you got of him. By the way—"

She broke off, went over to a cupboard, took out a file, and lifting a few letters, found one she wanted and drew it off. It was from Milan, and bore a recent date.

"DEAR MRS. WESTON,—Will you kindly send me a dozen copies of that last photograph of mine? Of course, I could easily have some done here, but you know I am a lazy beggar, and the trouble of sitting is immense. Besides, when a thing *is* a success, why not stick to it? I'm in no hurry, if you have no copies on hand.

"Faithfully yours,

"L. A. LE QUESNE."

Mrs. Weston re-filed the letter.

"I don't believe it of him," she said; "but his photos are ready to send, and if you have no objection I will tell him about the girl."

"I would rather you did not, but—do as you like."

"Will you write instead of me?"

He laughed.

"No. You are business manager, and the correspondence is your affair."

"Well, then, I shall tell him, to give him the chance of clearing himself of a very ugly suspicion. He will do it."

"Will he? Where *are* his photographs?"

She threw one across the table. Her husband held it away from him and screwed up his eyes.

"I remember him very well. Do you know that he is what you women call a 'fascinating' beggar? Not one of your atrocities who try to be fascinating, but who is so because he *is* so, and can't help it." He threw the portrait back. "There's one thing," he said, rather sneeringly, "if he were ever meant to be any good, he has circumvented the Providential intention by his choice of a profession. In a year or two hundreds of silly women will have flattered him into a conceited fool."

Mrs. Weston burst out laughing.

"How bitter you are! and only listen to the rain! We have lost that train, so can make ourselves comfortable for half an hour. I will write that letter while I wait."

In a few minutes she handed the written letter to her husband.

"Regent Street, April 30, 18—.

"DEAR MR. LE QUESNE,—Herewith your photographs. Shall be glad to hear of their safe arrival. Had you not better defer payment until you return?

"Such a curious little thing happened to-night in connection with these photographs that I feel I must tell you about it. Just as we were leaving, a girl—quite young and very pretty—found her way into the studio. She produced one of the photos, and earnestly begged your address. My husband questioned her a bit, feeling sure that she had mistaken you for someone else. He could make nothing of her, except that you had given her the portrait. We thought this most unlikely, seeing that she did not even know your name. I need scarcely say that we told her nothing. Trusting you will receive photos in good condition,

"I am, sincerely yours,

"E. M. WESTON."

Copy of letter received by Mrs. Weston some days later:—

"Milan, May 5, 18—.

"DEAR MRS. WESTON,—So many thanks for prompt attention to order. Photos arrived quite safely. Thanks for suggestion concerning payment; I may not be in England for six months, possibly longer.

"By the way, what a rum thing about that girl! Who the dickens was she?

"Of course, it was very good of you to keep faith with me, but should she come again, or you be in possession of any information as to her whereabouts, will you give her my name and address? It would be interesting to know what came of it.—With kind regards, I am,

"Faithfully yours,

"L. A. LE QUESNE."

Mrs. Weston passed the letter to her husband.

"He treats the matter as an innocent man would," said she.

"Certainly," he says, 'give her the name and address. I have no fear. I should be amused to see what came of it.' Now, to me that looks like innocence."

"Very well. But if ever that girl comes here again, I shall avail myself of Mr. Le Quesne's permission; I shall put her in possession of his name and address, although I should not expect to share in the amusement of seeing 'what came of it.'"

But the girl went to Regent Street no more.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE CURATE OF ST. SAVIOUR'S

IN a barely-furnished room of a house in another part of London, a man sat quite alone ; sat with drooped head and restlessly moving hands, like one whose thoughts are far away. The strong and cheerful light of fire and gas would have suggested occupation to most people, but this solitary man was idle. Judging by the pallor of his face, such idleness was necessary ; judging by the oddly restless hands, it was distasteful, and would be transient. And, indeed, idleness was altogether out of keeping with the air which pervaded that room ; out of keeping with the mass of papers on the writing-table, with the business-like books on the undecorated book-shelves, with the straight-backed, unrestful wooden chairs. The very mantelpiece was devoid of ornament, for the clock thereon was square and squat, disclaiming all merit but the indispensable one of accuracy. The one ornament of the room hung above the clock, and had brought its owner more in the way of misunderstanding and censure than any earthly luxury he could have set up. It was only a carving of wood, only a figure hung upon a cross, but it was terribly suggestive of the Scarlet Lady, and the sight of it did greatly exercise the minds of the strictly orthodox who had occasion to enter the study of the Rev. Frank Netherwood.

But Mr. Netherwood was no disciple of the Roman form of Catholicism. Catholic he was, in the broadest and best sense of the word, but he was fettered by no particular creed, and cramped by no particular dogma ; nor would he be controlled by those who were. Nominally attached to the Church of England, he was in reality Christian first and Churchman after—genuine enthusiast (known to the comfortable as “fanatic”) through and through. Of good birth, of ample private fortune, he yet chose to live among the poorest and worst of his kind, and to live in the humblest way ; following the right wherever it chanced to lead, combating the wrong wherever he chanced to find it, with never a fear of personal consequence. *Some-what alienated from his own kindred by what they chose to call*

his "eccentricity," he lived his earnest life alone; turned aside forever from the thought of marriage by the death of the woman he had loved, an earthly future of the purely personal kind he had none. He thus felt himself free to spend his strength and his money on his fellow-men, and he spent both without stint. It was nothing to him that his fellow-workers who wore the uniform of the Church, and professedly fought under the same flag as he, shrugged their shoulders and spoke of him in under-ones as "a little extraordinary"; nothing to him that even his own excellent vicar, in attending to the complaints of laxity brought against some of his staff, said extenuatingly, "Ah! you see, Mr. Netherwood has made it difficult for others who come after him. It is impossible to judge men by *his* standard. He is not quite as other men are. He is an enthusiast, what some people call a—a—well, a *crank*!"

Which speech, coming to Mr. Netherwood's ears, had caused him to smile, but had not altered his method.

"Let every man do as seemeth best to him," said he. For himself, he did what he did because he could do no other. Seeing things as he saw them, he would have accounted himself unworthy had he done less. But upon those who did less and thought it enough, he never sat in judgment, being above all things—merciful. Yet was there much of humanity in him, which the leaven of saintliness could not eradicate. When he went home one day, to find a very exalted personage in the shape of the Bishop of the Diocese sitting in the room where hung the Figure on the Cross, and found that the exalted personage had come there solely to request that the Figure be removed, all the pugnacity in him, which long years of self-denial had not killed, showed itself. He refused to remove the carving of wood, or to believe that its presence could possibly be a genuine cause of offence to any unbiassed follower of the faith it symbolised. In vain the good bishop pointed out to him that he was breaking a solemn Commandment when he set up that graven image, that he was placing a stumbling-block in the way of tottering feet, that he was counteracting the effect of his own good work when he permitted a doubt to be raised as to whether such work had its source in that which was of God or that which was of the Devil.

Mr. Netherwood, standing in front of the bishop, waited until he was invited to speak.

"Sir," he said then courteously, "if what I say shall give you just cause to doubt my fitness for a place among you, then by all means suspend me, for I can work as well outside the

Church as I can in. But I say, and I say openly, that good work *is* good work, by whomsoever done ; and if indeed I have been permitted to accomplish such work, then has no man the right to question the Source of it, for there is but One, and though my room were hung about with graven images by the score, that Source could neither be divided nor multiplied."

"That is a simple truth to us, but the uneducated mind is narrow, and clings to recognised form and rule."

"Because it pays the Church to keep to such form and rule. For me, sir, I hope those who know me will believe that if I had any leaning towards the Church of Rome I should not be attached to the Church of England, and for the carving—'crucifix' if you will—I cannot believe that it could offend any man or woman to whom I am personally known."

"But nevertheless it may, and remember, 'Woe to him by whom such offence cometh.'"

"Say, rather, sir, 'Woe to him who wastes his God-given life in the splitting of straws, and the killing of the spirit with the letter.' Has not our Church three iron crosses? Has not our altar a golden one? Is it the empty cross we preach? Are we afraid of the Figure by which alone the cross has any significance? No. But bring the two together and there is a great cry of animosity, not towards the symbol, but towards another sect, whose form of worshipping the same God differs a little from ours. If I hung a picture of the Crucifixion over my mantelpiece, even a painting of a crucifix, no man would complain, because it would be *flat*; I hang the wooden carving, and my very honesty is doubted. Oh! sir, we are the same children of the same God, and to me this cavilling is pitiful!"

"Yes, yes, I understand that," said the bishop testily, "but people *are* pitiful. If they weren't, the Church would not have her hands so full. Is there no little way by which we can get out of this? You say this was a personal souvenir? Well, why not hang it, for instance, in your bedroom?"

"I hang it, sir, in the room where I work. It assists me, and I should miss it. Moreover, if I hang it in my bedroom you would be hearing that I had set up an oratory. If it is where all men can see it, my sincerity should not be questioned. It *is* a personal souvenir, carved by a dying lad as he lay upon his back in a wretched room, and given to me because he had nothing else to give in return for a little sympathy and attention. No, sir, if I cannot remain among you without removing my little friend's keepsake, then I will work independently; but for the keepsake, it will remain where it is."

And the bishop walked off to the nearest corner, where his carriage was waiting, and drove to St. Saviour's Vicarage. He did not go in; the vicar ran out.

"Has your lordship seen Mr. Netherwood?"

"We have," said the bishop tranquilly; "our advice is to let him alone, and find more men like him."

So he had been "let alone," but the finding of men like him was still unaccomplished.

He looked tired to-night, very frail and worn. He had had a hard day, and might well have considered his night's rest earned; but the time wore on, and he sat there with closed eyes, contracted brows, and hands the restless movement of which never ceased. Twice the door opened, and an elderly woman, treading softly, advanced and looked at him, coughed to attract his attention, failed, and withdrew. The second closing of the door roused him. He turned his head towards it and opened his eyes.

Powerful influence over the minds of others is often traceable to some physical peculiarity in the person who wields it, and surely those beautiful eyes of Mr. Netherwood's had something to do with the power he wielded over those with whom he came in contact. Soft and dark and deep they were, at once humanly intelligent and divinely tender, eyes the penetrating quality of which it is hard to resist or to evade.

Perhaps it was that they had seen so much. Had seen the all but hopelessness of human reformation, and yet had kept their steady light; had looked into the depths of human infamy, and yet had never ceased to be compassionate; had watched the stifling nights through in dens where the poor lay herded together more filthily than swine, and had never turned aside in discouragement; had seen the innocent suffer for the guilty, and yet had never turned away in despair.

"Where is your God, who lets these things be?" said the cynics to the patient worker, to which he would answer with steadfast eyes fixed ever on the beyond where the light is.

"The man who wastes his time in asking other men *that* is little likely to find an answer."

When Mr. Netherwood's vicar had said of him that he was not quite as other men are, he had been nearer the truth than he was aware, for there were influences in the younger man's life of which he never spoke. To him they were real, admitting of no doubt or question. He neither sought nor evaded them, but once possessed by them, surrendered himself without resistance, feeling that he was being utilised for good, and for



good only. Such influences were upon him to-night, as he sat in his study, separating him from the outside world as completely as though he were not of it. His face was pale, his hands were clasped about the arms of his chair, his dark eyes had the uncertain, unseeing look of the sleep-walker. The room grew dark, and the objects in it faded away; all, as it seemed to him, but the carved Figure on the Cross, slanting downward where it hung, until the light of It encompassed him and shut him in, and all the rest was gloom.

There was a Voice in his ear which he knew, a touch on his head which he loved, a beckoning hand in front of him which he had never yet refused to follow, let it lead him whither it would. Then out of the great hush the Voice said:

"Listen!"

And he answered: "I am listening."

"What do you hear?"

"I hear the moan of the wind, and the driving rain outside."

The Voice said: "There is something more than that."

"I hear the tread of the passers-by, and the sound of a striking clock."

"There is something more than that."

"I hear the hoarse voice of a drunken man as he staggers by to his home."

"Leave him alone for to-night."

"I hear the muffled roar of London by night."

"That is not meant for you."

"I hear nothing more."

"Listen again."

"Nothing—nothing."

"Listen again."

"I hear the moaning of a human voice."

"What voice?"

"A woman's voice—and young. But it is faint and far away."

"Still, it has words. Can you not hear them?"

"The voice is low, but it seems to say, '*God help me!* What shall I do?'"

"Go out and answer it. The way is long, but not to willing feet, and dark, but not to eyes that see. Take no heed of its length, or of its darkness, or of its windings, and it shall bring you to a place where all is quiet, under the shadow of a great wall. There is a soul adrift to-night on the waters of despair. Go out and rescue it."

"I will go."

"There is no time to lose."

"I will lose none."

The light from the Figure receded ; the room grew bright again with fire and gas ; the still figure in the chair gave a start, and then a violent shiver, as the elderly woman who had entered before bent over it and spoke :

"I beg your pardon for startling you, Mr. Frank, but it is getting late and I was anxious, for you are so white ; and though you were asleep, your eyes were not quite shut. You are not well, or you are over-tired."

"I am perfectly well," he said, smiling as his old friend laid her hand over his dazzled eyes. She had followed him from luxury to work, and was privileged. "But I had no idea I *was* asleep."

"And you will go to bed ?"

"Well, by and by ; but first I must go out."

"Oh, not any more to-night," she urged in distress ; "please, my dear boy, not any more to-night."

"But it is imperative."

"Surely to-morrow will do ! It is a quarter to eleven now, and such a fearful night."

"Why fearful ?"

"Stormy. It holds up for a few moments, and then the rain comes down again in torrents."

"Rain and wind are nothing to the healthy. Will you let me have my boots ?"

"If you *were* healthy," she pleaded, "I mean strong. But you cannot expect to work at this rate without breaking down, and you look worn out. And when you *have* broken down, where will be your thanks ? If the people were worth it, I would not say a word ; but a whole city of them are not worth *you*, Mr. Frank, and all your trying will never alter them."

He went to the old woman's side, and, still smiling at her good-humouredly, lifted his hand, and pointed to his keepsake.

"Were we worth *that* ?" he said gently. "Now, there's a good soul, don't waste time, but find my boots."

She left the room with a gesture of resignation, while Mr. Netherwood went out to the hall, and there put on his overcoat.

"Any use taking an umbrella ?" inquired he cheerily, as he took his boots.

"I am afraid, Mr. Frank, no use at all."

"So much the better," he said, opening the door and bending his head as a great gust of wind swept in and all but extinguished the hall lamp. "I hope you will not sit up, because, if I should want you, you will not mind being called."

"You know that," she said, as she held the door with difficulty from banging, and stood to watch Mr. Netherwood as he went out, his head bent against the driving gusts, and his tall figure the one thing that was human in the gloom of the storm-swept street.

At the corner where the street opened into a busier thoroughfare he paused to consider a moment, then turned to the right and walked rapidly on. Past the first turning, past the second, pausing at the third for an instant, deciding not to take it, and continuing his hurried walk onward for a short distance. Then, as if confronted by a sudden obstacle, he turned and crossed the road.

Straight in front of him was a court—narrow, dark, evil-smelling. He paused again here, as if in uncertainty, but entered and went straight through, turning neither to the right nor left, speaking to no one, spoken to by no one, going his way blindly, trusting to the Voice within him to lead him aright.

At the entrance to a spacious square he raised his head, and saw that he was in a neighbourhood of which he knew little, his work lying in one not nearly so respectable. He crossed the square and came out upon a road where the cars were still running, and dripping 'busmen were urging drenched horses along a road as slippery as glass with the rain. Just as he came into the light of a lamp, a woman's figure, in sombre, shapeless garments, brushed past him, then suddenly turned back.

"Mr. Netherwood?" said a gentle, surprised voice.

"Sister Margaret?" responded he doubtfully.

"Yes. What a terrible night!"

"It is. Are you seeking assistance? Are you in difficulty of any kind?"

"Oh, no!—only going to relieve Sister Ruth for the night."

"Are you close here?"

"Very; 25, Errols Street."

"Thank you. Good-night."

He turned away and walked on, somewhat confused and harassed. The interruption had interfered with the clearness of his inner sight and hearing. For an instant fear took hold of him, fear of having done wrong in turning aside to ask direction of the Sister. But after one moment of keen dread, he put the thought behind him; his lip curled in sudden self-contempt. Was the God he served such a petty Deity that He should withdraw His guidance because of a question asked of one who seemed likely to

possess the knowledge that was necessary? No! He thrust the doubt away as one of the devil's prompting, and went swiftly on until he came to a place where three roads met. Here he paused, while the rain-storm ceased, and overhead a rift in the scurrying clouds disclosed one calm, bright star. He smiled at it gratefully.

To him it had a significant beckoning look. Surely his work lay that way? He crossed the busy road and took the quieter one to his left, walking on until the clock of a neighbouring church struck, telling him that nearly an hour had passed since he had left home.

"There is no time to lose," the Voice had said to him in the solitude of his room. He knew that he had lost none, and was not afraid; but smiled a little to himself as he thought of the howl of derision he could raise about his head, the flood of nineteenth century common-sense which would be ready to sweep over him, did he but tell his fellow-workers that he had come hither on this wild night in obedience to a Voice heard in a dream.

Not one of those fellow-workers but were ready to stand up on any Sunday of the year and impressively intone to a listening congregation the sacred stories of old. How that divine voices had come to men in the still watches of the night, telling them to arise and be about their Master's business. Ay, and not only would those fellow-workers impressively intone those stories, but they would confidently expect their hearers to believe them—would be shaken to the depths of their orthodox souls did any man dare to get up and say that he did not believe them.

But should any man get up and say, "I, too, hear the Divine Voice, and go whither It tells me;" how then?

Of a surety would the intoners of ancient truth turn, and say in their natural human voices:

"Thou art deluded, or the truth is not in thee. In either case thou art a danger to Society, and should be dealt with accordingly."

For Faith is of the past, or at best may now be permissible on Sundays. The thing for the present is hard-headed common sense, that stops the ears of man to any voice but the voice of Reason, that bids him trouble not his soul about that which he cannot see, and seeing—grasp; and grasping—show to his neighbour for a solid, tangible reality.

The Reverend Frank Netherwood smiled again as he thought how concerning things past men professed to walk by faith.

For the present—to walk by sight was customary and exposed no man to ridicule. Besides, the future draws so heavily upon one's credulity that, maybe, prudence suggests economy, even to the verge of present starvation.

The clouds were gathering again ; the star was hidden, but Mr. Netherwood pressed on, then suddenly paused and looked about him, trying to locate himself, but without success, for though he knew his London pretty well, he had taken little heed of the streets and squares through which he had passed to-night. He knew, however, that he was going North Londonwards, and fancied he recognised the road in which he stood, or could have done so but for the general gloom, which the flickering street-lamps did little to relieve. On the right-hand side of the road were good-class private houses ; on the left a lawn-like plot of ground enclosed by smoke-dimmed evergreens, and further by a smoke-blackened iron palisading mounted upon a low stone wall.

Two or three cabs stood on the stand hard by, their drivers half-asleep inside them, for shelters were not general in those days. The light from the lamps struck across Mr. Netherwood's path for an instant, and then was left behind, but it made him dimly visible to a woman who was leaning against the railings. She stepped out and spoke to him—spoke to him familiarly, persuasively, touching his arm with a hand which was covered with what had once been a delicate, well-fitting glove. He started, keeping his back to the distant, rain-blurred lamps.

"Is it *you* ?" he said, in an oddly disappointed, weary way.

"Me ?" laughed the woman. "Yes, it *is* me. But who you are the deuce knows. However, if we're old friends—"

"We are very old friends," he interposed quietly. "You are Kate Lucas, I think, and I—"

Before he could finish the woman recoiled, and pressed her hands over her ears.

"God forgive me !" she burst out piteously. "It's Mr. Netherwood !"

"Yes, it is I. I have made many inquiries for you, but have been able to find no trace of you. Not that I had given you up—don't think that. By your evading me for so long, I concluded that you were passing by some other name."

He spoke with an utter absence of reproach or anger, but the woman shrank from him as though she would have been glad had the earth opened to swallow her up. He followed her back to the railing, and stood close to her.

"Let me go, sir," she said, in a dreary way ; "let me go."

You can have nothing to say to me. You're one sort and I'm another—you at the top and me at the bottom. You've had a good many tries to alter me, and it's only wasting your time."

"Time is not mine, nor have I ever wasted it while it has been passed in trying to make you as happy as I am myself. Have you been thinking of me to-night?"

She looked at him, surprised.

"There's scarcely a day or a night that I don't think of you, sir; but for to-day, I doubt if you've entered my head at all, for a wonder!"

"You are in no urgent distress of any sort?"

"No, sir."

"Have you been with anyone who is?"

"No, sir."

He nodded thoughtfully.

"Where are you living now?"

She shook her head.

"I shan't tell you, sir," she said firmly. "No, I will not. You go to those who will repay you for your trouble. There are such, but I'm not one of them."

"Where are you living?"

"I shall not tell you, sir, not if I stand here all night."

"That is foolish, because I am so sure to find out. If I had not urgent work elsewhere, I should not leave you until you had returned to the Home with me."

"You'd have to wait some time, sir. I went back once of my own accord, because I couldn't shake off the thought of something you had said to me. Not a soul in that place warmed to me or gave me a welcome. They were all as stiff as their collars! When you came in on service night you gave me a glad, friendly sort of look, and I knew that you were pleased; but I heard the Matron say to you, 'Kate? Oh, yes, she's back—for a little while.' They knew me better than you, sir."

"They knew you not at all. I know you, and, because I know you, I refuse to take any judgment of you but my own. Before many days I shall have found you out. Remember, I never cease to pray for you, and—God is not deaf."

She whitened, and turned away with a miserable, impatient cry. She knew he would keep his word. He had found her out before.

It was raining again, heavily. She glanced up at one of the cabmen, who, wrapped in a sack, sat on his wretched box.

"Give me a rest inside?" said she.

"Don't mind for a few minutes, unless you're wet."

"I'm not wet. I've only just come out."

"Oh!" laughed the man; "dry inside an' out?"

"That's it," she said, as the hint appealed to her, and, feeling in her pocket, she offered the man twopence.

He shook his head. "Get in, get in," he said gruffly; "I don't want *your* money."

She gave a hard laugh, then huddled herself up in a corner of the cab to wait until the storm had driven by.

Mr. Netherwood waited for no storm, but pushing on in the teeth of it, came to the end of the iron railing, then put out his hand and grasped it, for the rain-laden wind swept round the corner with the force of a flying giant. Holding fast by the rail he peered up the narrow way—almost too narrow to be called a road—which lay in front of him. By the aid of a flickering lamp he saw that another side of the enclosed shrubbery ran along here, and fronting that—a dark unbroken mass of brickwork.

*"And it shall bring you to a place where all is quiet—under the shadow of a great wall."*

The words flashed through his brain like a touch of fire. He felt his cheek pale and his knees tremble, while his heart beat low, and the human life in him seemed to shrink down in very awe. For here *was* the "shadow of the great wall." He stood under it now. All was profoundly quiet and lonely, with the curious loneliness which close proximity to busy life accentuates rather than softens. The wall seemed to be a blank one, but as Mr. Netherwood stood under it, and, shading the pouring rain from his eyes, looked up, he distinguished two or three of the swinging semi-circular windows which are sometimes used to light stores or stables. The sudden stamp of a horse's hoof and the clang of a chain told him that the buildings were stables. Feeling his way along he came to a heavy door, securely closed and fastened for the night. Leaving this behind he proceeded cautiously for a few paces and stopped. Not a human being passed him, not a human footstep was to be heard on either side. Evidently the place was little frequented, even if it were a thoroughfare at all, which he felt inclined to doubt. It was a very unlikely place in which to seek anyone, but he was not discouraged. Something within him told him that he had been guided aright. He stepped back until his shoulder rested against the wall of the Mews. The shelter thus afforded him was slight, still it was something, and as he stood he listened. The rain was

falling lightly now, and the lulling wind crept round by the wall like the sound of a human sigh. Mr. Netherwood moved a few feet forward and stopped, with his hand on the wet brick-work, and his ear strained to catch that faint sound. It *was* a sigh, louder now and nearer; a sigh of the nerve-stirring, blood-curdling sort, like that which flutters through darkened rooms, where the watchers sit and tremble as they remember that even so shall it one day be with *them*. Many such vigils had Netherwood kept, but familiarity with them does not harden one. Even his blood ran coldly, and the roots of his hair lifted. Someone was lying within a few feet of where he stood, but though he peered to right and left, the darkness was so great that he could distinguish nothing. So he stood away from the wall, and, raising his voice, asked was anyone near?

The awful sighing ceased a moment, then went on afresh.

"Is anyone near?" he asked again, stepping back to the wall, for the sound seemed to come from there. A moment's silence, and then there came out of the darkness a smothered shriek of agony, or terror, or both.

Mr. Netherwood bent down and groped about. There, on the ground, huddled up against the dripping wall, was something human and feminine, but whether young or old he could not tell.

"Who are you, poor soul?" said he compassionately, "and what are you doing here alone? I am Frank Netherwood, a curate of St. Saviour's. Is that enough to make you trust me, and tell me what evil has happened to you?"

The wet heap writhed and struggled, beating itself the while fiercely against the wall. Netherwood tried to lift it, but two bare hands sprang out and heid him off. He desisted, and spoke again gently, trying to gain the confidence of his mysterious "find."

"Don't be afraid of me. Indeed I am what I say, a clergyman of the Church of England. Surely, therefore, I am to be trusted."

The woman—if she were a woman—only writhed and struggled like a thing in torment, twisting herself along the ground as if to escape notice. Netherwood followed her, and bending took firm but gentle hold of her.

"Don't try to get away from me. I am here to help you—*sent* here on purpose. Listen to me and try to follow what I say. You have been in sore distress to-night?"

No answer.

"You have been wondering what to do?"

No answer.

"You have cried to God for help?"



A despairing moan.

"And you thought He was deaf, or cruel, or had forsaken you?"

She gave a little sympathetic cry, as if *that way* of putting it touched her.

"That is not so, is *never* so. He heard, and has sent me. If you doubt it, ask yourself how else should I be in this lonely place, where I have no business but *you*? And which is some distance from my own home and my own work. Think if at any time to-night you have cried, '*God help me! What shall I do!*'"

Still no answer, but two bare, icy hands groped about until they found his, and held them as the drowning hold a rope.

"Tell me, is not that true?"

He felt a wet face touch his hands, and knew that she was acknowledging the truth of what he said.

"Now, do you doubt that I am here to help you?"

She made an effort to stand; he bent and lifted her, rested her gently back against the wall, then felt in one of his pockets. He had been the last in the mission-room that night, and had brought a box of matches away with him. Standing with his back to the wind, he cautiously struck a light, shading it with his hand. For one instant the figure propped up by the wall stood out in the feeble glimmer; for one instant two great despairing eyes met Mr. Netherwood's, two blue lips parted and twitched with impotent desire to speak, but in the next the figure had twisted face to the wall again, and Netherwood heard the same smothered shriek of agony, or terror, or both. He laid his hands upon the girl's shoulders; that she was only a girl that flash of light had shown him.

"In God's name," he said then earnestly, "tell me what I can do for you?"

"Nothin'—nothin'," she said through tight-clenched teeth; "where's the good o' *you*? I can't tell *you*."

It was not impertinently said, nor coarsely; the tone simply implied that she might have told somebody other than he. He took it at once.

"Is there anyone you *would* tell?"

"Not now, not now. Let me alone. I'm dyin'; but oh! it's so long about—so long—*so long!*"

"You are not dying. I am sure you are very ill, from some cause unknown to me. Now, I am going to get a cab and to take you to some place of safety where you will be well looked after. I shall be back in a few minutes."

She put out her hands and held him back.

"I can't tell *you*," she moaned helplessly, "but I see your face in the light o' the match, an' it looked *so* good an' kind ! An' oh, please, if you could take me to some *woman*, or fetch one here, I'd tell *her*. It's a woman as *I* wants. She'd know, an' she'd help me !"

"Stay here for five minutes," Mr. Netherwood said, "and I will send you what you want."

The girl was alone again, while her new friend walked swiftly back to the high road, remembering the cabs he had seen on the stand.

There was only one, and as he reached it, the door opened and the woman Kate got out. She tried to slip away unrecognised, but, quick as she was, was not quick enough.

"Kate, I want you."

"Not to-night, sir—not to-night. I can't come to-night, and I won't."

"Yes, you will. Listen to me."

"No, Mr. Netherwood, no. I'm going home now ; I am, upon my word. I just sat there out of the rain. It is clearing up, and I am going home. I'll report myself to you to-morrow."

"To-morrow will not do. It must be now. I want help, and you must give it me."

"You want help from *me*, sir ? That isn't likely."

"Never mind that now." He turned to the cabman. "I will come up beside you."

"Right, sir. It's pretty damp."

"That does not matter. Kate, you will get inside."

Kate reluctantly got inside, and Mr. Netherwood mounted to the seat beside the driver. In less than five minutes he gave the order to stop.

"This ain't a thoroughfare, sir ; this is the back way to Grandison's Gardens, and here's Grandison's Mews."

"You can wait here for us."

He descended and opened the cab-door for the astonished woman inside.

"Come with me," he said.

She obeyed. Everything was pitch dark, and the farther they went the blacker it looked.

"Where are we, sir ?"

"Quite safe," rejoined he cheerily. "We have not much farther to go. Keep close to this wall, and you will come to a girl—a poor, desolate creature in great distress. Will you say I

sent you? I will wait here in case you want help, but unless you do I shall keep in the background. I can do nothing for her. What she wants is a woman's help and attention. While I was wondering where to find her these things, I came upon *you*."

Something in the tone, an implied trust in her as a woman still, checked the bitter jest at her own expense that rose to Kate's lips. She went on up the dark, wet path as she was directed.

She found the girl still standing face to the wall, quite rigid and motionless, save for an occasional strong shiver.

"Come, my dear," said the woman, touching her timidly, "you're to come with me. Mr. Netherwood sent me. I'm to get you to the corner. There's a cab there. Oh, poor little soul! Why, you are drenched! No wonder you shiver! What *are* you doing here?"

Getting no answer, she ventured to take the girl in her arms, then felt for her left hand, and examined by touch its bare, cold fingers.

Kate asked no more questions, but stood thinking.

"You're a bit of a thing, and I'm strong, but whether I can carry you to the corner or not I don't know. Anyway, I can try."

The half-conscious girl was a dead weight, and Kate raised her voice:

"Where are you, sir?"

"I am here."

"Will you tell the man to 'back' the cab to here? She can't walk, and I can't carry her."

Cabby's unwilling horse was slowly backed with clatter and difficulty; but at last the lamps threw a patch of light on the spot where the two women stood.

Kate had taken off her smartly-shabby fur-lined cloak, and had wrapped the girl in it.

"Please take her while I get in, sir, and then give her to me."

She dropped into Kate's arms like a figure of stone, but finding a bright light upon her face, buried the poor face upon her new friend's bosom with a plaintive cry of shame.

Kate gathered her up and hushed her as one hushes a baby, talking to her, soothing her, stroking her dripping hair out of her eyes, and holding her hands to the warmth of her own breast, while the cab went on to its destination.

When at last it drew up in front of a lofty red-brick building, surmounted by an iron cross, a neighbouring clock struck twelve.

## CHAPTER XII

"GOD BLESS IT!"

MR. NETHERWOOD descended, rang the bell, was admitted, and spoke to the Sister-in-charge, who summoned the Matron. That good person showed signs of irritation as she looked at the girl, who was assisted into the hall, for she saw that rest for that night was out of the question.

The Matron's irritation was not unnatural. To be summoned from one's bed on a cold night is not conducive to geniality, and even the saving of souls may degenerate into a matter of business: office hours from ten to four. Therefore was there some parleying, a murmur of "No suitable accommodation for such a case," "It could be better attended to at a hospital," and the like. Which parleying was cut short by Mr. Netherwood, who begged that no obstacle be offered to the girl's reception, but that she be attended to straightway.

"For," said he to the flushed and fidgety Matron, "I can permit no obstacles—I see none. We have rooms, there must be one for her. Were there no other woman here, *you* are here, and can do your best for her. Pray let there be no half-heartedness among us. There should be none among those who have had the courage to—*profess*."

The Matron flushed deeper, glancing to the other end of the hall, where Kate and the Sister-in-charge were bending over the moaning girl: three very distinct types of womanhood—the Sister at the top, Kate at the bottom, and Annie a kind of connecting link between the two.

Mr. Netherwood passed out on his way to a medical man, saying to Kate as he did so:

"You will stay with her? You can be of use. I find we are short of hands."

"Yes, sir," said Kate meekly.

The Matron controlled herself, and set to work in earnest. Mr. Netherwood was *the* authority here. So much of his time, energy, and substance had been spent on the founding of this "Home" that no one dared rebel against him openly. In

vain some of the officers had tried to impress upon him the absolute necessity of "System," and the fatality of permitting one department to interfere with another; to urge upon him, in fact, the stern enforcement of rules and regulations.

"I see," he had responded promptly; "but I am not seeking to establish an office carried on by machinery. I could take you to scores of such failures now. My Home must *be* a home, and the officials must have hearts as well as heads. If I establish these rules you ask for, I ensure *your* greater ease and leisure, but what about the unhappy souls I seek to benefit? I drive them away with a scourge of red tape. No! I seek neither ease nor leisure for myself; in my helpers I expect to find those who are one with me."

Therefore was Annie Deane admitted to the Home that night instead of being sent to the nearest hospital. Not that it mattered one whit to her whether she were admitted or not, for her life was at too low an ebb. Those hideous hours between dusk and midnight had crushed all feeling out of her. In body and mind alike she had passed the acute stage of suffering, and was numb. But with warmth and skilful attention the numbness passed away. She had to come back to life, and coming, to lie in that high, bare room, moaning and praying to die, while the pale Sister and the watchful doctor listened to her passionate wonder that death should refuse to put an end to her torture and let her be at peace. Why had they brought her here? Why had they not left her under that wall in the rain? It was cruel, she burst out frantically, if only they had left her alone, she would have been quite dead now—dead, and cold, and quiet. Oh, merciful God! would someone pray to Him to send her a little, only a little, quiet?

What had she done that she should be singled out to suffer in this way? Was she too wicked to die? She had heard of strong people dying easily—dying swiftly, without pain, like a baby going to sleep, but for her—

The pain of a hundred deaths had got her in its grip. The very soul of her tried to wrench itself free of her body, to spring forward and catch the pale Figure that came near and looked her in the eyes, and yet withheld its hand.

At last, when the framework of the high, bare window began to show against the dim light from the sky, she gave herself up to despair.

"Where's the use o' prayin'?" she said. "I *am* too wicked to die, or else God has forgotten me."

The Sister fell on her knees, praying for pardon of the awful

words; half hoping, half fearing that they were the last that poor sinner might utter. But the time went on, the light strengthened, and the pale Figure, though it hovered near, seemed uncertain whether or not to stay.

But the Angel of Death passed over St. Saviour's Home that night, and the Angel of Life, passing in instead, breathed its divine essence into a little male child—whom it is true that nobody wanted, not even the worn-out mother, who, upon that day, completed her seventeenth year.

A neighbouring clock was striking seven when the Matron knocked at the door of Mr. Netherwood's room.

"It is useless to keep you longer," she said; "the girl will live, but she is prostrate, and incapable of understanding anything that is said to her."

"And the child?"

"Will live too. Both will be sure to do well. It is only your mother and child of value who die."

"I should like to see the child. It has a life to live, which it may not live to itself. Therefore it *is* of value, surely?"

"To you, perhaps," she answered, with a smile. "It is in my room with the woman Lucas. Will you go up?"

He mounted the stairs, went along the matted passage to a room at the end, and paused at the half-open door.

It looked grey in the early morning, and even a glowing fire failed to make it home-like or comfortable. In a chair, with her back to the door, sat Kate Lucas, crooning pitifully over the little bundle on her knees. She had not heard anyone approach, and commenced to talk to the poor baby bitterly:

"Poor mite, that nobody wants! You will only be a burden for her to carry all through her life, and one that everybody will take good care she shall never *hide*. What a pity you didn't die! One good thing—you're a boy, so life can never be as hard on you as it is on us. I wonder where the man is whose photograph I took out of your mother's poor wet dress to-night. I wonder whether he'd care if he knew that she was found under a dripping wall, more dead than alive, and that her neck was black and blue where she'd taken it between her hands and tried to strangle herself! Not he! Why should he? Who's to prove that it was any of *his* doing? It isn't right—we all, and they nothing; it isn't right. There's justice for a *man* in this world, and mercy; but if there's either for a woman, I've never seen it."

She laughed dismally, then caught the little bundle up in her arms and turned to pace the room with it, facing Mr. Netherwood as he stood in the doorway.

"I didn't hear you, sir."

"No? I heard *you*, instead. You were saying some terrible things, which would have been more terrible had they been true."

"They *are* true, sir. I'm not saying that I am the one to say what's right and what's wrong; but the difference between the sin of a man and the sin of a woman is a crying injustice, sir, and keeps many a woman down who would like to get on her feet again. Oh! I'm not talking of the like of *me*; I am talking of such as that poor thing we found last night!"

"Of *her* particular case I know nothing, but of one thing I am certain: whatever difference men may choose to make between the sin of a man and the sin of a woman, morally and before God there is *none*! As it is in her case, so it is in his; as she must answer for it, so must he."

"Then it is in the next world, sir; for as far as I can see, he goes scot free through this."

"I say—*never*! What a man sows, that shall he also reap."

"Ah! that sounds all right, sir; but asking your pardon for talking so to you, I don't think there's much in it, and I don't think it has ever stood *in* the way of a man sowing what he thought he would. A man can turn good before his reaping-time comes. When he's quite tired of doing what's wrong, he can turn round and say, 'Now I am going to be respectable,' and everybody thinks it is all right; but let the woman who has made one slip turn round and say that *she* is going to be respectable! Every man laughs, and every woman says, 'That you don't, if *I* know it!' Ah! don't talk to me to-night, sir; an angel from Heaven couldn't make me anything but bitter."

"And yet what would be impossible to the angel is quite an easy matter to this child."

Kate was pacing the room, with the baby's face held against her own. She stopped, not comprehending, then suddenly grasping his meaning, she smiled.

"Ah, well, sir, what does it know of bitterness yet? And who could be harsh to the poor little mite? God bless it!"

She caught herself up as the words left her lips, startled by them, ashamed of them.

Mr. Netherwood looked at her with a smile.

"You see you, too, believe; you, too, think there is some good in the blessing of God! You say He is deaf and blind to the working of evil, and to the suffering of the creatures He has sent upon the earth! According to you He is cruel, callous, unjust, unmoved by pity, insensible to prayer; and yet, when you wish to invoke some good thing upon the life of this little child, the best even *you* can say is, 'God bless it!'"

She thought a moment, while the expression of her face changed.

"That is true, sir," she said, with a sigh; "as you put a thing it always comes home to me. But we won't start the baby with *my* blessing. It isn't good enough, by a long way!"

She held the child out to him with some little hesitation. Without any hesitation, he took it, then, uncovering the tiny face, he looked at it kindly by the strengthening light of the coming day.

"May the God to whom our light is darkness; our knowledge, ignorance; our reasoning too pitiful for anger, bless thee! May the God of the fatherless be a Father to thee, the Friend of the friendless walk side by side with thee as far as thou hast to go! Being born to what men call 'evil,' mayst thou hold to that which is good; being born to nothing, mayst thou have what is better than all! So shall the shadow of the sin of thy birth prove to be but the shelter of God's outspread wing."

He kissed the child, and gave it again into the woman's arms.

And thus, with two widely different blessings, from two widely different people, Annie Deane's little son began life.



## CHAPTER XIII

### "WHAT IS THIS PLACE?"

FOR many days the rescued girl lay almost as silent as the dead, neither remembering the past nor caring about the future—lay in a state of mental and physical restfulness which was neither apathy nor content, but something between. Unable to nurse her baby, she did not feel that immediate interest in it which a nursing mother feels. When the baby was taken from her side, her dull eyes followed it; when it was brought back, a slight—very slight—change of expression would show that she knew it was there. But, after a while, she began to feebly grope about until she felt the tiny doubled-up fingers, began to try to raise her head in answer to a sudden cry; but when Kate or one of the Sisters came near, she turned her face to the wall, and stared at it with eyes that were vacant and dull.

The Sisters were extremely patient. Acting under medical orders, they made no attempt to rouse the girl to interest or animation, which, said the doctor, would come in time. He was right. Annie began presently to notice if the baby's place were vacant, to stretch her arm that the child might lie on it, to draw the little breathing body nearer and to touch the velvet head with her cheek. Kate was the first to witness the stealthy actions. She went to the girl's side.

"He's a *dear* little boy!" said she cheerfully.

There was a long silence, followed by a question spoken feebly.

"How old is he?"

"A fortnight yesterday."

Annie said no more then, but much later in the day asked in a stronger voice:

"Who've got my things?"

"The Matron," answered Kate, "but I undressed you, and I found some money. I have that until you're able to take care of it yourself."

"There was something with the money."

"Yes, a photograph; I've got that too."

Annie said no more.

"Are you pleased the baby is a boy?"

She considered, and presently said that she thought it was "a good thing."

"Why?" Kate asked gently.

"Boys don't have so much to bear as girls do."

"No, and he will be quicker off your hands."

As the days passed the current of her life began to quicken. Memory came back to her, and with it interest; interest brought the desire for speech, and such desire kindled the power to gratify it. When the baby was three weeks old the mother was a responsible being, strong enough to note what was passing about her, and to show signs of gratitude to those who tended her. It was not until she was able to sit up for a few hours during the day that the Matron attempted to question her.

"Your name is Deane, I think?"

"Yes, ma'am—Annie Deane."

"I want you to tell me something of your history. We wish to befriend you. The first thing is to know where you come from, that we may communicate with your friends."

"Please, ma'am, I don't want that done."

"Why not?"

"I don't, ma'am; and, please, I won't *have* it done if I can help it."

"But I must know why."

"My father an' mother haven't got no room for me. I done what wus wrong, an' I had to go away. I can't go back."

"Did you run away from home?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"To avoid your parents' anger?"

Annie hesitated.

"You were afraid they would find something out?"

"They'd found it out, ma'am."

"And were terribly angry, I suppose? They had a right to be so."

"Yes, ma'am."

"You ought not to resent their being so."

"I don't, ma'am."

"Will you tell me who led you into this terrible sin?"

She whitened, but said deliberately: "No, ma'am."

"You mean you won't?"

"Please, ma'am, I won't."

The Matron flushed.

"But you owe us some confidence. We have not asked you a single question, though you have been here nearly a month. Now that you are getting stronger we shall have to go thoroughly into your case. You will be able to leave us in a short time, and this raises the question—Where will you go? Taking your youth into consideration, we should naturally decide upon restoring you to your friends."

"I can't go back, ma'am."

"But it is your better plan, and your duty besides. If your friends refuse to receive you, then we will take the responsibility of finding you a suitable situation. But we must first see whether they *do* refuse."

Annie made no answer, only looked very white and shaky. Seeing which, the Matron did not pursue the subject further. On the next day, however, she returned to it with greater firmness, but was met with equal firmness on the part of the girl, who had evidently been preparing her defence.

"If you please, ma'am," she said respectfully, "I've left home for good. I can't tell you where to find my mother an' father. If you found 'em, they'd on'y say as I must get my own livin' in service; an' if I haves to do that, where's the use o' troublin' them? I don't want them to know what I've bin through; they'd make a talk about me in the village, an' *that* I wouldn't like."

"Which is beside the question, and nothing to do with us. We cannot permit your private dislikes to interfere with our duty. There will be much that you will not like, but you must face the fact that you deserve blame, and you must bear it with all the patience that time and prayer will bring you."

Annie's answer was unfortunate.

"Yes, ma'am, but I *can't* see as it could do any good to go home. I've done with 'em all at home, and they've done wi' me. I shan't never ast them to help me; they've got enough to do to help theirselves."

"Were they unkind to you?"

"No, ma'am."

"You had a happy home?"

Annie smiled, wondering what this severe lady would call a "happy home." She thought of the tiny cottage, of the bread—not always buttered—which made up three meals out of the four; of the bit of greasy bacon which so often did duty for the fourth; of the hard little bed on the floor from which she had been accustomed to rise so very early; of the incessant wants and wailings of the ever-recurring babies; of the incessant

"clucking" of the mother-voice, rendered shrill by the ceaseless round of petty cares which will turn the gentlest woman alive into a shrew.

The memory of it all swept over Annie and carried her back to the Berkshire village, to her unchildish childhood, which those lurid-golden days in the pine-wood had ended so abruptly. The Matron's question went unanswered, while the girl's dulled memory woke and quivered painfully.

"Were you happy at home?" repeated the inquisitorial voice.

"Yes, ma'am."

"You led a happy life with kind parents, and yet you fell into temptation. I wish you would tell me how this happened?"

"I *can't* tell you, ma'am."

The answer ruffled the Matron.

"I dislike throwing benefits in the teeth of those who have received them," she said; "but as they are not *my* benefits, I must speak of them. Do you realise how much has been done for you by the officials of this Home? Do you know that you were brought here in a dying condition?"

"I scarce recollect comin' here, ma'am."

"But you must have known since. Your life hung upon a thread. But for perfect medical aid and devoted nursing it could not have been saved. No lady could have been more tenderly cared for than you have been here."

"It's been very good of you all," said Annie humbly.

Now this might be humility, but it was not gratitude, and gratitude was what the Matron wanted to see.

"You have been here nearly a month," she said, "you and your child, and you have taken it all as a matter of course. In the ordinary way, a girl of your class would have been at work again by this time, but you have not even tried to rouse yourself to the extent of considering what you are going to do; so now we must consider this for you. Of course, we cannot claim gratitude, but I think we have a right to some information respecting you and your past history."

The girl was roused; she sat up and spoke with some energy.

"If you thinks I'm ungrateful, ma'am, you're wrong. I can't say a lot, but I'm sure it do seem wonderful to me that I should be in a place like this, with gentry lookin' after me. But it's on'y the last few days as I've had the heart to look about me. As to work, ma'am, I'll do anything you thinks I can do, and be glad to do it."

"That is not what I mean," said the Matron hastily. "I am not saying that you are fit to work at present. I am asking for a little confidence in return for our attention."

"Please, ma'am, I had some money when I come here, an' the young woman Kate, she's got it. I've got four pound. Wouldn't that pay for me?"

The Matron looked up in surprise.

"It is a lot of money for a girl like you to have. How did you come by it?"

"It wus give to me, ma'am."

"Who gave it you?"

"It *wus* give to me, but I can't tell you no more."

"How long have you had it?"

"Since last August, ma'am."

The Matron understood, and flushed with righteous anger.

"I am afraid you fail to understand the meaning of 'impertinence.' I must talk to the others about you. If you will not answer me, perhaps someone else will meet with more success," saying which she picked up her work and left the room.

Annie sat and cried. She had honestly meant the money to pay her expenses, but had not thought it would be necessary to disclose her private affairs, nor did she mean to disclose them.

This reticence made her enemies, as it had done before. The Matron ceased to take any interest in her, and was at no pains to conceal the fact. The Sisters drew her grievous pictures of her mother's agony of mind concerning her. Kate, arrayed now in the sombre uniform of the Home, advised her stealthily to tell the Matron just enough to keep her from "harping about it;" but Annie held her peace, and saw all sympathy drift away from her.

When the time came for her to join the other inmates of the Home, something rose within her like a great wave of aversion and resistance. All Mrs. Fryer's hints and allusions to her stained character took definite shape. She shrank from the inmates in uniform. Out of place as she had felt among the saintly nursing Sisters, she felt still more so here. She had avoided asking questions, but now she watched her opportunity and spoke to Kate.

"What is this place?" she said steadily.

Kate shifted her eyes from Annie's, but made no reply.

"What is this place?" repeated the girl, more steadily still.

"St. Saviour's Home."

"Home for who?"

"For such as you and me."

"What *are* you?"

Kate was dumb.

"What are you? I know what I am, but there's somethink about you others I can't make out."

"Well," said Kate hardly—"well, then, if you know, answer me first and tell me what *you* are."

Annie considered, trying to answer truthfully.

"I'm a girl that's done what she shouldn't do, that's made one gre~~at~~ mistake, and is very sorry for it."

Kate was getting harder.

"Well," she said, "we're women who have made a score of such mistakes, and are *not* sorry for it—that's the difference."

Annie sat down. She was still weak and easily excited.

"That *is* a difference!" said she piteously.

"I daresay to your way of thinking just now it is, but to most people's way of thinking we're equal. One such mistake as ours, or a dozen—it is all the same. They herd us together and ticket us alike."

"That isn't fair."

"I suppose not. But don't sour me, Annie; don't make an enemy of me, for I like you, and I'm sorry for you."

"I don't want you to be sorry for me. If what you says is true, you'd better be sorry for yourself."

"Too late in the day for that, so I can afford to be sorry for you."

Annie was touched.

"I don't ast no questions," she said, "becos' I haven't answered none; but did you ever make a mistake like I've made?"

"Yes."

"And was left with a baby to keep?"

"No."

"Then how come you—"

She stopped, puzzled how to convey what she meant.

"Never mind me," Kate said briskly; "I shan't make you any wiser than you are."

"But I can't make it out. I can understand it for *once*, but to talk o' makin' a mistake like this—*again*! I can't understand that, nohow."

"You will understand fast enough, or you will be very lucky, unless—unless—"

She laughed bitterly, and stopped.

"Unless what?"

"Unless you can swallow their doctrine of eternal damnation,

*Then* you can enjoy the blessed privilege of hard work for the rest of your life, with the Bible for consolation."

"I've worked hard ever since I was a child. I don't mind that."

"Then perhaps you'll keep afloat. I hate hard work. I always did."

"Ah, but you've bin brought up better than me ; you speaks better."

"That is only the difference between town and country. I went into service young as under-maid to some young ladies. I think I picked up their way of speaking, and it has stuck to me ever since. Also, I picked up their notion of getting through life as easy as possible ; their liking for dress and pleasure, and lying in bed late, and leaving all the trouble to whoever was unlucky enough to have to take it on. My ! what a selfish lot they were ! Good-natured and pleasant enough in their way, but bad teachers for a girl who wasn't too steady at best. It's dress and laziness that ruin girls, Annie. It's only here and there that one's ruined by what they call love !"

"Well, I'm not lazy, an' I've never had no dress but mother's old ones, cut shorter in the skirt, an' took in in the body to make 'em fit."

"A town girl wouldn't stand that. I think you had better go back to where you came from. Here you will be finding out that you are what's known as 'pretty.'"

"Oh !" the touch of flattery drew her out at once, "he *said* I was pretty !"

Kate laughed.

"Of course 'he' did. You mean the man in the photograph ? Come, now, *he* was no plough hand, no farm labourer ? He was a gentleman, I know !"

Annie shut her mouth in a tight line.

"And he wasn't short of money !"

The girl said nothing.

"I say, Annie, I'll never tell a soul, but—who was he ?"

"I don't know."

"My word ! that's a good joke ! Do you mean—"

"I means to say nothink about 'im, neither to you nor to nobody else."

"That's straight !" said Kate demurely. "You'll see him again ?"

Annie made no response, only said that she thought it "time to go down." As they went downstairs, they met the Matron going up.

"Annie Deane," she said, "come into my room."

Annie turned and followed her up.

"Will you close the door? Thank you. I have noticed that you are very friendly with Kate Lucas."

"I didn't think I was friendly with anybody, ma'am."

"That is rather an impertinent answer. I am willing to believe that you did not mean it so; still, anything approaching self-assertion in a girl like you prejudices people against you. I would advise you to guard against it. As I said before, you *are* friendly with the girl Lucas."

Annie did not reply.

"Are you sure you knew nothing of her before you came here?"

"She've bin in London all her life, ma'am, an' I never see London till I come into it that day they brought me here. So I couldn't have knowed her, could I?"

"You might have answered me straightforwardly, with a 'Yes' or 'No.' Do you know that she is unlikely to do you any good?"

Annie thought she saw a chance of saying the right thing.

"Oh, ma'am," she said impulsively, "I did think that myself!"

The Matron raised her brows.

"That is scarcely what I mean. I don't know why you should set yourself above your companions. I simply wished to say that there *are* others who would be safer confidantes for you."

Annie felt rebuffed.

"There are girls in the house who are sincerely repentant, who are striving to get back into the right path. They might be of some use to you, but in Kate Lucas I have little faith."

Annie felt so sure now of saying the wrong thing that she was nervous.

"If you please, ma'am, I'd sooner not know anybody as is here. How will I set about gettin' some place o' service? I think I'm fit now."

The Matron looked as if the girl irritated her, as indeed she did.

"The truth is, we do not know how to deal with you," she said. "It is our custom to study the past life of our girls, with a view to understanding their requirements. But you have given us no opportunity of serving you in this way. You have your health and strength restored to you, and now you wish to walk out of the house as much a stranger to us as when



you came. You either do not understand things, or you are more deficient in the sense of gratitude than any girl I have had through my hands."

The tears found their way into Annie's eyes.

"I am not ungrateful," she said. "It's on'y that I've bin reck'nin' to pay; an' now I finds I can't, I don't know what to say."

The Matron's colour deepened.

"Evidently you do *not* understand," she said, "or you would not talk of payment. I don't know of anything which has so repelled me as the glib manner in which you talk of that terrible money! I should have thought better of you had you been as reticent concerning it as you have been concerning your past life. I suppose the only thing is to find you a situation. What can you do?"

"Anythink, ma'am, as is *work*. I can wash, an' scrub, an' cook, an' mend; an' mother, she says as I'm a rare good ironer; an' as to children, I can do anythink for they."

The Matron shook her head.

"I am afraid your knowledge *there* will be of little use. I could not recommend you for the care of good-class children; you speak so badly. There is nothing open to you but general service."

"What's that, ma'am?"

"You will have to go as 'maid-of-all-work.' As a rule, I set my face against this class of situation for our girls; but if you will not let me assist you to anything better, I must give way. If you stay here for six months I shall know no more of you than I do now, so perhaps we had better find you a place at once. You may go down."

On the following day Annie was sent into the laundry, where she had a certain amount of work given out to her. She got through this with credit, and was afterwards pointed out to the Matron as one of whom good work might be expected later on.

Kate Lucas happened to hear of this. She managed to sidle up to Annie.

"They will give you the chance of staying on," she whispered hurriedly. "Good ironers are scarce. But don't stay. You'll do better away. I want to speak to you if I can get the chance, but they are keeping you out of my way."

Here the woman in charge came up.

"There's a van-load just in," she said. "You two might go and sort it out."

Annie followed Kate, who set to work on a heap of linen, talking rapidly as she worked.

"Listen to me, for I shan't get a chance to speak to you again, perhaps. Some time ago I lived in a square off the Camden Road as general servant. I didn't stop long, but it has come into my mind that that place would suit you until you're fit for something better. You might learn a lot from the old lady. She doesn't do much herself, but she'll potter about and show you how to do things. She's strict, but that won't matter if you mean to go straight. I've had her on my mind these two or three days, and to-night, if I can get out, I'll go and tell her all about you."

"But perhaps she don't want a servant."

"I'm going to see. Anyway, don't stop here. You'll learn more harm among the girls than you'll learn good off the Sisters—"

Here the Matron, passing the open door, paused and entered the room.

"One can manage this sorting," she said, "and Annie Deane may cease work for to-day."

After which she stood and waited for Annie to follow her out.

Kate laughed to herself.

"All right," said she dryly, "you are a very good woman in your own estimation; but as for Annie Deane, I shall do her more good than you will. Anyway, I can try."

## CHAPTER XIV

### "ONE OF THE HOPELESS SORT"

KATE did try. After working hours she applied for leave to go out, which was granted, providing that she chose to accept the companionship of one of the Sisters. She smiled, but submitted, remaining silent as to the nature of her errand, and puzzling the good Sister by walking so far and so fast.

Arriving at the house she wanted, she hesitated.

"Must you go in with me?" she said to Sister Ruth.

"I am supposed to do so," was the timid answer; "but I will wait. I am sure I can trust you not to get me into any trouble. You know that I am new to my work."

Kate nodded, and rang the bell.

"Is Mrs. Holt at home?" said she to the servant who opened the door.

"Yes."

"Can I see her?"

"Who shall I say it is?"

Kate hesitated.

"Oh, tell her somebody from St. Saviour's Home."

The girl pushed open the drawing-room door, and Kate walked in, looking round at the once familiar objects with a smile.

"Who'd have thought I should ever have seen the inside of this house again," she said to herself. "Here she comes, with the same little patter along the hall, and the same rustle of the old black silk."

"A light here, please, Emma," said a brisk voice outside.

"Emma," mused Kate, "*I* was Emma. I wonder she doesn't change the name for luck."

She drew back behind the door as an old lady entered, followed by a girl with a lighted taper. A pretty old lady, small, plump, pink of face, and with a bright youthfulness of eye—an old lady who might have stepped out of a picture, snowy-frilled fichu, black satin cap-strings, big paste waist-buckle, and all.

While her servant lit the gas, she turned herself about to find her visitor.

"Oh! pray don't sit there behind the door," she said; "you are in the draught of the crack. Come and sit—"

Here she paused, lifted two fat little hands as if to ward off an imaginary horror, and cried:

"Oh, dear me, how *could* you? Oh, how *very* dreadful of you! How very dreadful, Emma! It is, it is, indeed!"

"Please 'm," said the startled taper-bearer, "what have I done?"

"You? Nothing. I don't mean you," said the old lady, trotting over to a big chair and sitting down in it. "Go away; don't say anything to Mr. Holt. Shut the door, and don't listen outside."

When the door had been shut with an indignant bang, Kate stood up.

"How *could* you?" the little old lady burst out afresh, patting the arms of her chair in great excitement. "To think of you having the—the dreadful effrontery to enter this house, to stand there looking me in the face! I wonder the ceiling does not fall in! I wonder the floor does not give way! If I tell Mr. Holt that you have been here he won't believe me."

"If you will let me, ma'am," said Kate quietly, "I will tell you what I came about. It wasn't for myself."

"I should think not. It would be useless. Even if I wanted a servant ever so badly (as I do), and Mr. Holt were ever so anxious to see me suited (as he is), I should never be able to persuade him to let me try you again. He is so very firm! You must remember, Emma, how impossible it is to move Mr. Holt when once he has made up his mind."

"Yes, ma'am; but as I said just now, I am not come on my own account at all."

The old lady trotted over to another chair.

"Make haste and say what you have come about, then. This is extraordinary! Only this morning I said to Mr. Holt, 'I am sure I am going to see someone I have not seen for a long time.' I had that feeling. And we were wondering whom it could be. I thought it must be Georgie."

"Did you say that you were wanting a servant, ma'am?"

"I do want one badly. But you know, Emma, I did say when you left (not that I want to cast a stone—oh, dear, I don't want to do that!), but I certainly did say when you left that never, never, *never* again would I engage a girl with any—any stain upon her character."

"The girl I came about is very different to me."

"Is she above suspicion? Is she quite respectable?"

"She can be made so, ma'am," said Kate, "by anyone who is willing to help her. She's only seventeen, and now's the time to take her, before other girls have got at her, and have told her what she doesn't know. I've thought what a safe place this would be if I could get her here. She'd be a good servant to you—I know she would, with a little showing how."

"But how comes she to be dependent upon your recommendation? You know, Emma, how careful I am about casting stones, but you must see that your recommendation is likely to do her more harm than good."

"If you'll let me, ma'am," said Kate patiently, "I'll tell you all about it."

She did so, with many interruptive assertions on the part of the old lady to the effect that it was all of no use, and that she would never be able to persuade Mr. Holt to receive another girl who was not in *every* way above suspicion. Still, she asked many questions concerning Annie Deane, and during Kate's recital of the girl's story, kept up a running commentary of "Poor thing!" and "Dear me, how shocking!" and "Oh, to think the world should be so wicked!" Really, she wondered that Heaven did not send another flood and sweep away the people for their wickedness!

"Of course," said Kate in conclusion, "I can't answer for anybody's being genuine, but I do think this girl will repay any trouble that's taken for her. She's not had her fling like the rest of us at the Home. She won't mind a tight hand over her, nor she won't expect much liberty, unless the Matron gets her into 'good' service, where the others will put her up to what she can get in the way of privileges, if she likes to hold out for them. She knows nothing of all that now; she's just as much a child as her own poor baby."

"Ah, that is the thing! There is the baby. Fancy a girl of seventeen with a baby! In my young time such a thing would have been quite a scandal. Now nobody takes much notice. There really ought to be a universal Day of Humiliation, like there was in the time of the Great Plague! Oh, dear! if I attempt to persuade Mr. Holt, I must suppress the fact of there being a baby."

"The Home people will help her out with that, ma'am, as long as she shows herself deserving. They won't let the child stand in her way."

But Mrs. Holt stood in great fear of her husband, or pretended so to stand.

"I must tell him before I sleep to-night," she said; "I am sure he will be dreadfully angry with me for promising to do anything for a girl with such a dreadful stain on her character; but I should be glad to get somebody. I cannot put up with this girl. She will not keep her place, and she takes liberties. You must remember how very firm Mr. Holt is upon the subject of taking liberties. He will have a girl in to her time, and he knows directly if there is any fruit gone out of a tart. Then he insists upon my going down to the kitchen when the tea is made, because he says that the girls pour off the best cup for themselves."

Kate smiled, with the air of one who is wise.

"Then you'll see the Matron to-morrow, ma'am? I hope you will! She doesn't understand Annie Deane, and the sooner they part the better."

"Well, if I can anyhow persuade Mr. Holt, I will go; but really I have very little hope, very little indeed. Now, tell me about yourself. I am so thankful you are back with the good Sisters—"

"Yes, ma'am," interrupted Kate, "I'm back, but Sister Ruth is waiting for me outside, and I must go."

"Oh, I see! Will you let yourself out, quietly? I must steady my nerves before I go down and tell Mr. Holt that you have been here. Whatever will he say when I tell him that I have promised to try that unfortunate girl? And oh! I do hope I shall be able to suppress the fact of there being a baby."

Kate withdrew, closing the door. As she stood for a second on the mat outside it, the old wild feeling that she knew swept up and possessed her. There was that in her which loathed restraint, which was inimical to every kind of authority. Set up anything representing Law before Kate, and an unreasoning devil in her did instantly arise to beat at it and sweep it away. The Home was hateful to her because it represented Authority; the Matron was hateful to her because she represented Authority; the inmates were despicable because they tamely submitted to be ruled by petty self-appointed Authority. A gaoler was still a gaoler to Kate, gaoler he never so mercifully, for she had the temper of the born Anarchist, which will pull down the house of the Ruler, though the falling ruins mean death.

Her way out lay through the front door to her right, but down four stairs to her left the garden door stood open. She

threw up her arms with an inarticulate cry. The way out! there was a way out, which did not lead to the Home.

"Here goes!" she muttered, springing down four stairs as lightly as a cat. "I can't go back *there*. If there was any repentance in me the inside of that place would kill it in a week. I can't breathe there. It chokes me. I'm one of the hopeless sort, and Madam the Matron knows it, so she came this afternoon and marched Annie Deane away from contamination. That is how they practise the charity they preach. There's only one Christian among them—Netherwood. I've often thought that whenever I did find a Christian without a handful of stones ready to throw at the first sinner who came along, it would be a *man*. Christianity is too hard for women; it means too much self-control."

She laughed as she flew down the garden path. If the garden gate was locked, she must turn back. It *was* locked, and the key was not in it. Go back? Not she! She dragged the garden seat to the wall, mounted first one and then the other; in one minute had swung herself down, in another was running through the narrow avenue of back entrances as if all the Furies were after her. At the end of the dreary avenue she paused, then stood a moment to regain her breath. As she did so, the face and the voice of the "one Christian" she had found came vividly in front of her. She writhed away from it.

"Some day," she muttered, "in some other place, but not in St. Saviour's Home. I'd try for *you*—I'd be a slave to *you*, because you're what you say you are, and not a white-washed sham! Well, I've done Annie Deane a good turn. I've found her a safe home; I think I'll write and give her a hint or two about the old Judy who blames everything on to poor old hen-pecked Punch. I've certainly gone out of my way to rescue Annie Deane. I'll enter that on the credit side of my ledger. There are not many entries on that side, and the debtors' columns are choke-full. I shall never balance up! I wonder how long the poor simple soul will walk up and down the square? She will give a timid knock presently and ask if I'm ready. Poor old Judy will have a fit, but it won't stop her from going to see Annie to-morrow, on the chance of securing a girl who won't want to eat the fruit out of the tarts, nor help herself to the tea."

## CHAPTER XV

"I'LL CALL HIM THAT, OR NOTHING AT ALL"

It was Annie Deane's last week at the Home. Mrs. Holt had used her persuasive powers upon Mr. Holt with excellent results, and the girl was to enter their service without delay. She was glad, and did not hesitate to show it. Kate's disappearance had made things harder for her. Disliking her from the first, the Matron was now thoroughly averse to her, and would be glad to get her out of the house, so that she and the circumstances connected with her might be forgotten as soon as possible.

For Annie was associated with another "failure," and the Matron hated failures, because they made Mr. Netherwood inquisitive, and sent him probing deeply into the subject of Cause and Effect, with the former of which there was never any telling who might prove to be identified. Therefore let them be rid of Annie Deane with all speed.

But before she could go there were one or two little ceremonies of a religious character which must be gone through for the credit of the Home. Had Annie ever been confirmed? Yes; she had.

The Matron lifted her brows, sighing at the inefficacy of *that* ceremony.

"Why were you confirmed?" said she severely.

"Because the Bishop wus comin', ma'am, an' I wus gone fourteen."

"Did you feel any desire to be confirmed?"

"No, ma'am. A lot of us went together."

"You should not have gone unless you felt yourself to be prepared."

"I think I said somethink about not wantin' to go, but mother said it was rubbish, so I giv' in."

"You were wrong."

"Yes, ma'am," said Annie meekly.

"Your baby will be christened on Sunday afternoon, at S



Saviour's. If you have not decided on a name for him, you had better do so."

"Please, ma'am, I have."

"What are you going to call him?"

"Lin."

"What?"

"Lin."

"After whom are you naming him?"

The girl coloured distressfully, but said nothing.

The Matron felt tranquilly amused.

"You are thinking of 'Lynn,' she said, "which is a surname. You could not call your child that. It would be ridiculous."

"It isn't a surname, ma'am. I *knows* that."

"You know very little, I think, and you are evidently mistaken. At all events, it could be but a pet name for a longer one; or, as is sometimes the case in good families, the mother's maiden name given to the son."

"It might 'ave bin that."

The Matron gave way to anger. Fancy allowing this girl to give her baby a gentleman's pet name. There was no shaming her ignorant presumption! Of course, "Lin" was the name of the man who had ruined her.

"You will do better not to call the child anything so inappropriate," she said. "If you cannot see how—how shameless it makes you appear, I must tell you. Please think of something *sensible*. I could not submit such a name as this to Mr. Netherwood."

Annie was very white.

"Then we'll let it be without any name at all, ma'am," she said quietly. "I can't see as it matters much."

"But it does matter. The child must be known to the parish authorities by some name. He will take your name of 'Deane,' and some other, something plain and suitable, he must have as well."

Annie spoke respectfully, but firmly.

"He'll be named 'Lin,' ma'am," she said, "or nothink at all. If I could see as it mattered to anybody, it 'd be another thing, but I can't. Who's to care what I calls him? I'm not meanin' to be saucy, ma'am, but it really isn't nobody's business but mine."

She trembled lest the Matron should be powerful enough to thwart her.

She had made up her mind long ago. She had heard the

little name but once ; had caught her breath as it slipped un-awares from its owner's lips. He had been telling her of the life his friends had been good enough to plan for him—a life in the office of a highly-respected lawyer uncle. One of his cousins had kindly "taken it on," said he, "instead."

"For it's more in my line than yours, Lin. You would bolt in a month. Street-singing, now, or nigger business would suit you much better."

Annie had not heard the last part of the sentence, being so interested in the first.

"I knows your name !" she had burst out excitedly. "They calls you 'Lin.'"

He had made one of his odd grimaces, but had not denied the name.

And now, in spite of contempt and derision, she stood her ground.

"Who's to care what I calls him?" she repeated, with a choking in her throat as she thought of her friendless baby. "I'll call him that, or nothink at all."

"So," said the Matron to Mr. Netherwood later, "I left the matter for you to settle. I find the girl quite intractable."

Mr. Netherwood smiled.

"Really," he said, "I see no objection. Three letters of one sort make a name as well as three letters of another. Take, for instance, 'T-o-m,' and you have 'Tom'; 'J-i-m,' and you have 'Jim'; 'J-o-e,' and you have 'Joe.' 'Lin' suggests a refinement which strikes you as being out of place? Well, I cannot see our right to dictate to the girl in the matter. It only concerns herself."

"But the point is this:—the girl is naming the child after the man whose whereabouts she has refused to disclose. Surely we are encouraging a bad thing; we are making a sort of heroine of her. She is leaving here as no girl has ever left before. We know nothing of her; we are not in touch with her friends. I say that we have permitted ourselves to be duped into neglect of our duty. She will leave here, will leave the child behind her; will then put herself in renewed communication with this man, and we shall actually have aided rather than prevented her. If nothing worse comes of it, she will form one of those terrible permanent connections which we are powerless to reach."

"I am not afraid."

"Well, you see you are not as practical as I. You are an

Idealist, and are taking this girl for what she is not. She is artful and—presumptuous.”

Mr. Netherwood's luminous eyes looked steadily into the Matron's.

“You dislike her,” he said; “you are unjust to her, *because she has not satisfied your curiosity.*”

“Mr. Netherwood!”

“I repeat it. You are influenced by personal pique. Forgive me, but these things should have no place among us.”

Her crimson face betrayed her. She had sense enough not to attempt denial.

“Perhaps you are right,” she said; “but we have had some failures lately, and when I see lives like yours recklessly sacrificed for worthless creatures who grimace behind your back it hardens me against them.”

“Then,” Mr. Netherwood rose and spoke with gentle firmness, “it becomes necessary for you to resign your position. We cannot have hardness; we cannot have intolerance. Our life here is from day to day, and admits of no anticipation, no discouragement because of the retrospect. We must be patient, we must be *impersonal*; we must be careless of ridicule, and have no eyes for that ‘grimacing behind our backs.’ We must do each our own duty and leave the rest. As long as we are troubling whether or not it *pays* to do our duty, then I think we are doing two things at once, and one of them—not well. If any poor soul, struggling however feebly to the right, struggles in here and is received with half-hearted sympathy and ill-concealed scepticism, then we are disgracing the name under which we fight.”

“Mr. Netherwood, at the risk of being misunderstood, I tell you that your extreme tolerance does harm. You give too much latitude. Analyse your theory of unlimited patience, and you will find that it means allowing women to drift in here and out again as they will, and as Kate Lucas *has.*”

“And where have we any authority for a limit? Find me one, and I will sift it to the bottom. Suppose a girl comes in here and goes out again six times, and the seventh comes to stay? It is our business to receive her, but it is not our business to show her that we do not believe in her. By so doing we open our doors, and she drifts out. If your personal want of faith has been in any way answerable for Kate Lucas's falling away, I must beg you to resign your position.”

She turned as white as the collar at her throat.

“Oh!” she said piteously; “oh, Mr. Netherwood!”

"I say I must. You are *the* power here, and I must know that you are quite selfless in your intercourse with these unfortunate women."

"With the *unfortunate*—yes; but I have been talking of the wilfully perverse."

"Leave them, or rather ask whether the wilfully perverse be not yourself. To us, all who enter here are simply and literally 'unfortunate.' Unfortunate, inasmuch as free to follow that which is good, they yet follow that which is evil, to their own cost; free to walk in the sun, they yet turn to the shade; free to walk upright in the open ways, they yet will crawl among the filth and tangle of a dismal swamp! For such marvellous lack of perception should there be anything but helpful pity? Above all, when the poor blind creatures stumble in here, should they be confronted by personal doubts as to the sincerity of their desire to see? Never mind whether they come once or a hundred times, they shall be welcomed; if not by you, then by somebody in your stead."

She stood, grasping the back of a chair.

"You leave me no alternative," she said. "When this Home was established, seven years ago, I took on its management. I was going to say that I have done my best, but talking to you always makes one wonder what one's best might be made by increased effort. I have sometimes felt that the woman Lucas would be the cause of my leaving. I say nothing about the justice of sacrificing me to her. You say it is right, and what you say I never question. I will stay until you can fill my place, and will give my successor any information I can."

"Stay a moment, you can help us in another way. Will you remain as manageress, and give the other duties into the hands of Sister Elizabeth? You would still guide the machinery, as it were, but would have nothing to do with those who enter or those who leave."

"You propose to utilise my business capacity?" she said bitterly, "and to give Sister Elizabeth the right to order me about?"

"I do not look at it in that way. You profess to have the welfare of this Home at heart, but you have shown yourself unfit for the post you have hitherto filled. This raises a difficulty. My proposal shows you a way out of it. Which is to be? Is it the Home, or is it your pride?"

She considered a long, long time.

"I could not be a servant to Sister Elizabeth," she said at last, very slowly, "so I suppose it is my pride."

"I am sorry," Mr. Netherwood said to himself as the door closed behind her ; "but if she interfered with this work, it was imperative that she should go."

## CHAPTER XVI

**"BUT IF THAT WOMAN COULD LIVE TO SHOW SHE  
WASN'T RUINED?"**

On the following Sunday Annie carried her baby to church, and, in spite of opposition and ridicule, he received the name "Lin," in addition to that of Deane. Now it happened at the afternoon service, instead of bringing peace to Annie, it brought sore trouble and misunderstanding. The day was hot, and the sermon—specially addressed to those about to be confirmed—was long. Baby Lin lay across his mother's knees, sleeping as peacefully as the most reputable baby alive, while the voice of the preacher resounded through the building, now swelling in exhortation, now sinking to a whisper of warning or reproach, but always failing to convey to Annie any idea what it was all about. There was nothing of which the ignorant child could lay hold; it was all high-sounding and vague. Annie tried her hardest to follow that discourse, hoping to come across something which should serve as a guide to her, which would shed some light on the path of her everyday life. The pastor and the Sisters had told her that worldly things were dead to her, and that she was dead to them; that religion was the thing by which alone she might venture to steer her course through the sombre existence which remained to her; that she must be content with joys of the higher, unseen sort, with the hope of the world to come. She had listened very patiently, being young, but had not questioned the truth of what she heard. So Religion was all that was left her? If that were so, then must she and Religion be close friends, and understand each other very thoroughly! She had set to work to find out what she made of the Christian life as set forth in the New Testament. The first thing she had discovered was that the pastor himself was no Christian, the second—that to be a Christian at all was a hard, not to say impossible, thing.

"I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which

despitefully use you and persecute you, that ye may be the children of your Father which is in Heaven."

And again:

"Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also."

These words, and many others of the same purport, had set the girl thinking. She had heard and read them many times, and had not understood. She understood now, and was deeply impressed as she thought of the number of professing Christians she had encountered in even her limited acquaintance.

"I wonders how so many people *dares*," she said to herself, in sudden awe. "They wouldn't if they see these commandments like I sees them. Mrs. Fryer was always talkin' of herself as one of God's people, an' the Matron seems to talk as if she wus that above bein' like other people that there wus no gettin' up near her! But neither of they wouldn't do good to anyone as did evil to them, nor stand by patient to offer the other cheek! I don't think I'll ever *tell* anybody that I'm a Christian. I'll keep it to myself till I see how I gets on."

She had said it in all good faith and reverence, and had shut the Book slowly, very sad at heart.

She settled herself to-day to listen to the sermon with all her might, eager to be helped forward upon a difficult way, to hear something which should open the door of her dark soul and so let in the light.

The preacher enlarged upon the blessed privilege of baptism which all enjoyed in common; upon what he termed the "glorious mystery of baptismal regeneration," by which, while they were yet unconscious babes, they could become participators in the priceless gift of salvation. He reminded them again and again that they were "baptized into the very body and blood of Jesus Christ." He felt he could not sufficiently impress upon them this magnificent truth.

Annie caught the sentence, repeating it to herself upon the words—vague enough in themselves—were totally meaningless and bewildering. She put them behind her at last, only to find that she had lost what bit of the thread of that discourse she had been able to pick up, and that the preacher had lost himself in a labyrinth of high-sounding words which might be impressive, but were certainly not intelligible.

Annie's desire for practical guidance faded away in disappointment. Her attention wandered to the beautiful windows, to the high-arched roof, to the snowy reredos in the dim, rich chancel; then it came back to the people about her

to the yawning school children, to two bent and wrinkled aged people who reminded her of the villagers at home. She looked at them kindly, and smiled. Then everything seemed lost in a misty hush. She lost consciousness of what was passing around her because of something which was passing within her, until she came back to present circumstances with a start because Sister Elizabeth had tapped her sharply on the arm. Holding her baby more tightly, she sat upright and saw that the other girls were staring at her, and that Sister Elizabeth's solemn face was all alight with indignation. She turned crimson, and bent over the sleeping baby.

Through the remainder of the service she knew she was in disgrace, and after a silent walk back to the Home, was followed up to her room by Sister Elizabeth herself.

"Annie Deane," said she gently, "this is your last Sunday here, and we have all been hoping that the remembrance of it would be blessed to you. But for something I myself saw this afternoon, I might have let you go without further warning."

"What did you see, ma'am?" faltered Annie.

"I saw your conduct in church, and I am obliged to say that it was very bad. The others were preparing for a solemn ceremony, and through you their attention was turned aside. Before you leave us we must try once more to show you the only way by which you can hope to hold your own against the evil which is struggling for mastery over you."

"What did I do?" sobbed Annie miserably, "*do* tell me what I've done."

"I was watching you the whole of the time. I saw you look about you; first at one window, then at another; I saw you look at the school children and at the old people. When you could find nothing else to interest you, you let your thoughts drift away to worldly matters, and then you openly *laughed*. It was a scandalous thing, and caused the attention of the others to wander. I must report this to Mr. Netherwood. He comes after Evensong to speak to those who leave us to-morrow."

Sister Elizabeth turned and left the room. Annie threw herself down and sobbed until she was weary and faint.

Between five and six Sister Ruth came up with some tea.

"Don't cry like that," she said kindly; "I am sorry you are in trouble on your last day with us. I feel so sure you did not *intend* to set a bad example this afternoon. I saw you smile, but I thought it was only because you were happy. And I should like to tell you not to be afraid of Mr. Netherwood when



he sends for you presently. Tell him whatever is in your mind. He is so good and so very patient! Speak out to him, and don't be afraid."

Sister Ruth departed then, but the gentle words put renewed life into Annie. She begged to stay away from church, and, once by herself, sat down and wrote a letter; one which was apparently difficult to write, for it took so long, and so many tears were shed over it, that as she laboriously fitted the paper into the envelope, she heard the others come in from church. She began to tremble, knowing that her summons from Mr. Netherwood might come at any moment.

Now to Annie Mr. Netherwood was a being of another sphere, scarcely human, knowing so much without being told; scarcely divine, being so manly of speech and so sympathetic. His message was not long in coming. Annie obeyed it haltingly. Outside his private room she paused, leaning against the door in a state of uncontrollable agitation. She dreaded the strong, bright light inside; she dreaded the clear eyes which, meeting hers, would see through all her secret thoughts, try how she might to hide them.

She knocked, was bidden to enter, and found, to her boundless relief, that the room was dark. The blinds were down, and matches and taper lay ready upon the table, but Mr. Netherwood sat with his back to the door, nor when it opened did he lift his head.

In truth, he was ashamed of the attitude the Sisters had assumed, and were compelling him to assume, towards the girl; and as he sat there waiting for her, one version of an old Story came into his mind, touching him with a sense of hitherto undiscovered beauty and delicacy. According to this version there was brought unto One in the days of His ministry a woman upon whom He was urged to pass summary and immediate sentence because of her being taken in open and shameless sin. But He paused, and stooping, made as if He would have written something upon the ground, "*As though he heard them not.*" That memorable, graphically-painted scene flashed into Netherwood's mind, and he understood that stooping Figure and averted Face as he had never done before.

Surely the most human, the most *manly* and chivalrous act here in this Book recorded! Showing that before even *that* poor, battered wreck of womanhood He was ashamed, and that until her howling, open-mouthed accusers had slunk away He mercifully forbore to look her in the face.

There was silence in Mr. Netherwood's study for some few moments, and then it was Annie who spoke.

"If you please, sir, you sent for me?"

"Yes; you are leaving us to-morrow, and I want to say a few words to you. Will you sit down? I am suffering from headache, and shall be glad to leave the gas unlit for a while."

Annie's fear vanished in sympathy.

"I'm sorry," she said timidly; "please, sir, don't trouble about talkin' to me if you're not well."

"Oh, it is nothing much, and I must say something I have promised to say. The Matron and Sister Elizabeth are concerned about you. They feel they know as little of you now as they did when you came."

"Yes, sir!" said Annie drearily.

"I wish you could have decided to trust them. It would have made you friends, and given you a home here to which you might have been glad to come sometimes."

"What is it they want to know, sir?"

"For the first thing—your parents' address. Your want of desire to assure your friends of your safety strikes the Sisters as heartless, and, on *this* point, I agree with them."

"Please, sir, I have wrote to mother to-night. I would have done it before but for bein' afraid o' the Sisters seein' where I sent the letter. They'd sure to have wrote, too, and p'raps what they said would ha' fetched mother or father up here after me. I didn't want that, sir. They no more wants me back there than I wants to go."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Quite sure, sir, so I thought I wouldn't write till I'd got a place an' wus goin' to it. I couldn't go back home without the baby—"

"We will take care of him if you like to go back alone."

"I couldn't, sir. He've got nobody but me, an' I can't go an' leave him behind, so I'll stop where *he* is, sir."

"That reminds me—I believe Mrs. Holt wished you to conceal the child! You were very decided in refusing. The Sisters thought a little too much so."

"Yes, sir; but I've made up my mind never to hide the baby, an' I wus afraid they'd try to persuade me. I want to do what's right, tho' they don't believe me; an' how can I do that if I begins by makin' out I haven't got no baby? If I makes believe he is not mine it'd be a lie, and I couldn't start agen with a lie, sir!"

"That is true."

"That's why I couldn't go back home. I'd be so much more tempted to hide him—*there*. Here, as long as I does my duty, why should anybody interfere about my baby?"

Mr. Netherwood was silent. The Sisters complained of Annie's unbecoming manner, but as far as he saw she spoke straightforwardly and sensibly. She did not cringe—that was all.

"Please, sir, did you hear that I got into trouble this afternoon?"

"I did. I wished to talk to you about it."

"What did you hear, sir?"

"That you were inattentive, that your manner was not such as befitted the holy place you were in; that, having allowed your thoughts to drift entirely away, you suddenly and openly *laughed*."

The girl rose and stood leaning against the table.

"Sir," she said quietly, "please, that isn't true. I didn't tell nobody else the truth o' this afternoon's church, but when I'm talkin' to you I feels I'm talkin' to someone as will *believe* me. It wus like this: I went to church as happy as anythink, thinkin' o' my new place, and how good it wus o' God to find a home for me an' the baby too. I went there expectin' to hear somethink as would help me an' show me how to get on. Right up to the sermon I right down enjoyed it, for it wus beautiful, an' one o' the hymns we used to have at home. When the minister began the sermon, I found it wus to them as wus goin' to be confirmed, but the things he said I couldn't understand. I tried *hard*, but at last I give it up, for I couldn't understand. What he said didn't seem as if it had anythink to do with *me*. I looked round. The girls wus sittin' up straight, but I could tell they wusn't lis'nin', and two poor old people agenst the door wus gone to sleep. I begun to feel like cryin'. Sister 'Lizabeth have often told me that there's nothink but religion left for me as long as ever I lives, and I wondered how could I ever be happy with on'y a thing as I couldn't understand? An' how could it keep me from doin' what's wrong. My head begun to ache, an' I sort o' went sleepy, till somethink set me lis'nin'. It kep' beatin' through the church like a great *heart*, so that mine kep' time with it. I couldn't make it out, but it was a reg'lar 'throb!' 'throb!' as didn't never stop, and seemed like to go on *always*. But then come a funny whizzin' noise, an' a click, an' it struck four. The beat went on agen directly after, an' I knew it wus on'y the big clock up there in the

tower. But somehow, sir, it had showed me more than the preacher had, and I see quite clear that it didn't matter whether I could understand or not. Him, an' his voice, an' the people all seemed a long way off, till there wus nothink left but the beat o' the great clock, an' *me*. I thought of how it had kep' on night an' day long 'fore we wus born, an' how it'd go on jest the same after we wus all dead, an' I see as clear as daylight that the long words I couldn't understand need not trouble me nor yet nothink else; for I see that the God who'd made even *Time*, an' could keep everythink steady an' sure like the beat o' that great clock, could take care o' me an' my poor baby. I can't tell it to you as it come to me, but it *did* come, an' I know I'll never forget it. I wus that happy, p'r'aps I *did* laugh—I couldn't say now."

She stopped, and the sound of her wistful voice seemed to linger about the twilight room.

"Do you understand me, sir?" she said, after a pause. "It sounds somehow poor now I've spoke of it, but it wus clear enough to me then."

Understand? Did he not? His face was buried in his hands, and his eyes were full of tears.

"I do understand," he said earnestly, "and I tell you that you saw more in that flash of light than I or any other man could show you in a life-time! The God Who made you spoke to you in the beat of that clock, which does but measure out His time. Never mind whether you understand the words of His minister or not. You know now what I know to be enough."

Annie underwent a sudden reaction. That this man, who to her was little short of a saint, should come down to her level, should stand, as it were, side by side with her, and not be ashamed to acknowledge it, was too much for her. She dropped her head on the table, and burst into tears.

He rose and laid a gentle hand on her bowed head.

"Have no fear for your future. I know you will do that which is right. If it will be of any comfort to you, remember that I understand you, that I trust you, that I believe if you fail in your new undertaking it will not be your fault. And if you do fail, come to me; I will find you another home wherein you shall succeed. Keep hold of what was given you in church to-day, and do whatever is given you to do with all your might; then, although life may be wanting in what is known to many as 'pleasure,' I promise you that it will yet be well worth living, of actual use and value to you and to those who know you.

Now, having told me so much, will you tell a little more? I am not asking this to satisfy myself. You are suspected of being in communication with the man who was the cause of your coming here. Will you tell me if this is so?"

"It isn't, sir."

"You know where he is?"

She hesitated.

"I'm goin' to say what'll p'raps make you think I'm tellin' a lie, sir; but tho' I once heard him say that name what I've give the baby, I knows no more what his right name wus, nor *who* he wus, than *you* do, sir."

He looked as he felt—surprised.

"Please believe it's the truth, sir."

"I believe it. A lie between you and me would not be possible."

"It must seem unlikely, sir, but I say agen it's the truth. I come to London hopin' to find him, but I know now there's no chance."

"Which is a merciful thing for you. This makes your future all the more hopeful, seeing how utterly your past is—done with."

"Yes, sir!"

There was such a quiver of pain in the dreary words that they touched the human side of Netherwood.

"Let him go," he said steadily, "and put all thought of him behind you."

She sighed miserably.

"I'll try, sir; but it's hard for me to think him so bad as he seems to be to you what didn't know him."

"God forbid that I should call any man bad. But the fact remains that he did a terrible thing, for which soon or late he will have to suffer."

"No, sir," she burst out excitedly, "*I've* suffered enough for that; an' if I never learned to pray for nothink else, I'd pray God not to punish *him*. Why should he be punished—*now*?"

"Could any man think to ruin a woman and not answer for it?"

"Yes, sir; but if the woman could live to show as she *wasn't* ruined?"

Netherwood was startled. It was such a desperate question, asked with bated breath—fearfully. The Matron or the Sisters would have instantly said: "You *are* ruined, beyond all hope or doubt," but the random hurling of harsh truths had no part in the curate's method. For a moment he knew not what to

say. The girl went on piteously, speaking as if to one who could not fail to understand, and so—to help.

"I don't want him punished; oh! I don't want him punished! He was young, an' kind to me, an' I *know* that if he'd thought about it he'd never have done a bad thing to nobody. If I've sinned once and am sorry for it, why shouldn't he be, too? If I'm forgive for my sin, can't he be as well?"

"We will hope that he is sorry for it."

"I'm sure he is," she said, with her hands locked hard one in the other. "I knows him. I wish you did. I've heard the Sisters say as it's your delight to find some good in them as others thinks is all bad."

"I have found no man *all* bad, thank God! But I beg of you to look at this man fairly, to cease to cling to him as something which he is not. I must say, and that in very decided fashion, that his sin towards you was of the vilest, and I fear that the more I knew of it the less reason I should see to alter my opinion."

"That's what they all says," she said grievously. "That it *wus* one of the worst sins, and deserves a hard punishment. It was—first along—the thinkin' o' that as made me try to be a good girl. An' I *will* try—I *will* try! Becos' if, after all, I could prove as I wusn't ruined, wouldn't it come right? Would it be fair to punish a man heavy for what he hadn't done?"

"I see what you mean, but he cannot escape, seeing that the intention was to ruin. It is the intention, you see, rather than the deed."

"He never intended," she said, with steady persistence; "if 'twas anythink, 'twas for want o' thinkin'."

"Well, I am not sure that it is my part to teach you hard thoughts of anyone, even of him. Put him away from you as completely as possible, or think of him only when you are upon your knees."

At that moment a lamp in the street was lit. The feeble rays came through the drawn blinds, making a patch of light in the quiet room.

"It seems to me," Netherwood said, "that I read your mind on this subject, and I see there a hope that you will meet this man again."

"Yes, sir, I feel that some day before I dies I'll see him agen, *somewhere*. I don't see it's very likely, but there's that feelin' about me all the same. An' if there was anythink as I could choose, I'd like to be able to show him some day as I'd

done well for myself an' the baby what he didn't know about; I'd like to tell him how I'd tried to be a good girl, so as he shouldn't have to answer for any harm as had come to me."

Mr. Netherwood rose.

"I think I have no more to say just now. Should this man cross your path again, I beg of you to let me know. Against all ordinary temptation, I believe you can—with God's help—hold your own, but against that one you might fail."

"I don't think you'd need to fear, sir," she said, in her old-fashioned, patient way; "there won't be much now to tempt me. All I've got to hope for when I leaves here to-morrow is that I'll be able to please them as is kind enough to give me the chance, an' that I'll learn to be a good mother to my poor baby."

Netherwood held out his hand in silence; in silence Annie put hers into it, and then passed out of the dim room into the gas-lit hall.

On the next day she passed out of the great iron gates of St. Saviour's Home into the work-a-day world outside, there to begin life afresh in the humble capacity of a domestic servant.

On the following Tuesday morning the village postman gave Mrs. Deane a letter. It bore no address, being simply headed by the date :

"MY DEAR MOTHER,—I hope you havent been very worried about me, becos Ive been better took care of than I deserved to be. I am going into a place of service with a lady and gentleman to-morrow, and your not to think but what I will do all right. My dear mother, I have been a sad truble, and I am very sorry. I cant come back, becos theres something else to be thought about, and I couldn't bring it home, so I must stay away and work for it. It hasent got nobody but me, and never will have, so I must work hard and do without myself to let him have it. I don't mind work, as you knows. My dear mother, pleas dont tell the others about me bein a bad girl, for I was fond of the little things, and I know they was fond of me, and I wouldnt like to know that they was learnt to think bad of me. I have had all my things for service found me, and some money what I had when I come here (its a Home) give back to me. So I got the Matron to tell me how to send money away. She give me this peace of paper for ten shillings. Pleas buy something for one of them, the baby I

would like best, and kiss him, for I do think of him, and I did miss him at first. I shall alwis think about you all, and if you will write to me and address the letter to the Reverend F. Netherwood, at St. Saviours Home, London, E., I shall get it by comin for it. But I do hope you wont be comin after me nor perswadin me to come back, becose I cant never do that. With kind love to father and you and all,

"I remain, your loving daughter,  
"ANNIE."

Mrs. Deane was little touched by that letter. It came too late, and was too independent in tone. Also, whatever anxiety she had felt for her daughter's safety had been tempered by the memory of that five-pound note. She thought of it now as she looked at the post-office order for ten shillings.

"She could well afford to send it," was her bitter comment; "all her things found her, and two or three pound in her pocket. She's better off than we, Dan'l. P'raps she've sent an' paid Mrs. Fryer somethink for her board. I'll ast Mrs. Drake if she have—that I will."

Annie had not sent Mrs. Fryer anything at all, and her parents thought it an unpardonable omission. Moreover, they said what they thought, which led to Mrs. Fryer thinking the matter over, with the result that Mrs. Drake was the recipient of the following remarkable document:—

Mrs. Drake,

To Mrs. Fryer.

	£	s.	d.
Six weeks' board and lodging, at 7s. 6d. per week, for Miss Annie Deane .....	2	5	0
One case of wax flowers under glass shade, broke by Master Deane .....	0	10	0
In consideration of housework done by Miss Deane while she was here, at 2s. 6d. per week .....	0	15	0
Balance due to Mrs. Fryer.....	2	0	0

Mrs. Fryer will be *oblidged* by receiving the above at your earliest convenience.

This document caused Mrs. Drake more than one fit of immoderate laughter.

"God bless the silly woman!" she panted, as she wiped her eyes. "Why, we'll pay her a trifle for the girl's board, to be sure, if she's that stingy; but as for the glass shade!—them



there things is goin' out o' date fast, an' a very good thing too! They was never like flowers as grew in any garden I ever see; an' why I *don't* know, but they alwis did put me in mind of a coffin! She ought to have give that child sixpence for makin' an end of 'em."

But the glass shade was paid for after all, in strictest secrecy, by a lad whose name was Jim.

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE FIRST FOUR YEARS

If life in her new sphere had promised Annie little variety, it certainly kept its promise; if she had expected hard work and plenty of it, she was not cheated, nor did she, in consequence, grumble.

The days were very much alike in that quiet suburban square. To rise at six every morning was no hardship to Annie, but the descent to the underground kitchen, where flourished black beetles by the score, was a trial which she never learned to face with fortitude. With skirts held high, with some flat and heavy missile at hand, she would make for the hearthrug, which was religiously laid down in the afternoons only, and would hurl it away from her, while she waited for results with set teeth and dilated eyes. Then would follow a great and loathsome slaughter, which scarcely left Annie mistress of the situation, seeing that she stood as much in awe of the dead and dying around her as she did of the scurrying survivors of the massacre.

"If there is anything in your new life you find specially hard, don't be afraid to speak of it," Mr. Netherwood said to her the first time he had an opportunity of seeing her alone. "It very often happens that a trouble spoken of is a trouble lightened."

"Oh, sir!" she said ruefully, "there's nothink I think but what I can get used to, 'less it's the beetles; an' they swarms at night so as you can *hear* them! I knows it's very stoopid, but I'd rather work double as hard in a place where there wasn't no beetles."

Mr. Netherwood laughed, at which Annie turned very red. It was a little thing, but there is room in a large mind for very little things, and Mr. Netherwood made a private note of Annie's beetles. He sent his own servant to Merryon Square with a well-tried "exterminator," which, without exterminating, materially lessened; and one can get used to most things, even black beetles.

There were many other troubles of the minor sort of which Annie never spoke. For instance, a girl who rise at six gets

hungry before nine ; but nine was the breakfast hour in Merryon Square, and no permission was given Annie to anticipate this. At first she wondered if there would be any harm in making herself a cup of tea between seven and eight, the time when she began to feel a bit faint ; but one little incident which happened during her first week settled that point for good.

Mrs. Holt, spotless and fresh and juvenile, trotted down to the kitchen at five minutes to nine, and took the teapot from the dresser. Annie saw her put one hand on its shining side.

"It feels *warm*," she said, with a slight accession of colour.

"Yes, ma'am ; I shone it up a bit, because I was standin' about waitin'."

Mrs. Holt lifted the lid and sniffed.

"It smells of *fresh* tea," she said, her pink colour deepening to red.

"Do it, ma'am?" said Annie. "I rensed it out when I polished it—p'raps it's that."

"No, that would not do it. Are you sure"—she was very red now, and flurried—"there has been no—no—tea *made* this morning?"

Annie understood.

"I *am* sure, ma'am," said she quietly.

"Oh ! it didn't matter if there had. It is only that I like to *know*."

But Annie saw by her mistress's manner that she was not expected to have anything before nine.

Mrs. Holt never locked anything up, on principle, but was incessantly worrying herself and her husband anent something which was gone, "going," or "likely to go," until she had determined beyond any sort of doubt that it did or did not go. She liked to leave things open because it gave her the chance of proving the honesty of the maid in charge. She was not altogether ungenerous, but while she would give away the value of a pound she resented the taking of a pennyworth without permission. If some edible nick-nack happened to be overlooked until it was spoiled, she would say :

"Oh, dear, Emma, why not have eaten it?"

On the other hand, should Emma happen to act upon that hint and eat something to prevent it from spoiling, Mrs. Holt would be sure to remember that edible nick-nack and ask for it, after which she would flush and fidget and be extra dignified, by way of conveying a reproof she had not the courage to speak. Annie very quickly understood, and conducted herself accordingly.

At first she owned to a great dread of the master, whose adamant "firmness" she had had impressed upon her, but she soon found that the mild little man was the happiest nonentity alive, who would no more have dreamed of interfering with his busy little wife's fads than he would have thought of trotting off "solus" for a holiday. It is true he once ventured to suggest that a couple of spoonfuls of tea be left out overnight for "Emma's" breakfast, but the suggestion was provocative of such an indignant remonstrance that he instantly apologised; also, he ventured to think most girls expected a night out, and that Emma might not be an exception.

His old lady promptly sat upon him.

A night out for a country girl of tarnished reputation—a night out in London? Oh, what was Mr. Holt thinking of that he should try to thwart his wife in her efforts for the girl's good? Did she not go on errands? Did she not in that way obtain plenty of fresh air? But to think of giving her a night out? Oh, how dreadful, to be sure!

"Of course," finished the little woman severely, "if you wish to manage the girls, or to alter my rules for *this* girl in particular, no matter how *surprised* I may be, I must give way; but until now you have had the greatest respect for my opinions, and the greatest admiration for the way in which I manage."

Mr. Holt could only protest that his admiration of his wife was vast and unshaken, that he believed her to be the kindest, most indulgent, and most wonderful woman in Christendom! What more could any man say? Simply nothing, so he reiterated what he had said until his wife was mollified.

"I'm sure," she said, with an air of injury, "things must be coming to a pretty pass if I am to be set down for a severe mistress! The fact is, I am too indulgent, and I get imposed upon. Only a short time ago, Mrs. Sherman—Mrs. John Sherman—was here to tea, and the way in which Emma (our last Emma) spoke to me about something quite took her by surprise.

"My dear," she said to me, 'you will never be successful with servants while you allow them to speak to you in that familiar way. Of course, I have no right to praise myself, but I will say that I have no trouble whatever with my servants.'

"I said I knew that, as indeed I did.

"Well," she said, 'I will tell you how I do it. I set my foot down from the very beginning upon any attempt at *intercourse*. I won't be spoken to except upon the subject of work.

When I first engaged Maria—the girl I have now—she tried it on ; they all do. I had occasion to go into the scullery one morning, where she was doing something at the sink. “It’s a lovely morning, isn’t it, ma’am ?” she began. I made no reply. She looked at me out of the corners of her eyes.

““Isn’t it a beautiful morning, ma’am ?” she said again, with all the impudence imaginable. I went on picking over the fruit for preserving.

““Isn’t it a lovely morning, ma’am ?” she said, as if she thought I might be deaf. I put out my hand and set the tap running. She looked at me for a minute, and then she understood. That girl never addresses me now unless she wants an answer.’ Now I ask you, Mr. Holt, what you would say to me if I were to treat a fellow-creature like that ?”

The artful little man patted his wife’s shoulder.

“My dear,” he said gallantly, “pray don’t quote Mrs. John Sherman. Odious woman ; the very opposite to everything a woman should be—the very opposite to *you*. I cannot have you mentioned in the same breath with Mrs. John Sherman.”

“That is just the point,” said Mrs. Holt triumphantly. “When I can be hard and exacting and inhuman, my servants will give me a good name ; but I cannot help being indulgent, so I get imposed upon. My poor mother always said I should never learn to keep *anyone* in their proper place.”

And that old personification of indulgence trotted off to the kitchen. She had an idea, only an idea, that Emma sat down for ten minutes in the afternoon before going up to dress.

As time went on Mrs. Holt began to realise that in “Emma” she had something approaching the ideal of her domestic dreams ; and the more she realised this, the more she put her ideal to excellent practical uses. Other girls had shirked the washing ; this one did it, and did it well. Other girls had entirely misunderstood the treatment of the necessary flat-iron ; in the hands of Emma it became not only harmless, but beneficent. Other girls had refused to benefit by Mrs. Holt’s practical lectures on “Gravy as it is *versus* as it should be,” and had known no medium between potatoes served as a *purée* and potatoes served as an easy-medium-for-acquiring indigestion ; but Emma’s gravy soon ceased to be detectable from Mrs. Holt’s own, and her potatoes were beyond suspicion. Her needlework, too, was above the average, and Mrs. Holt was a generous contributor to bazaars !

“The girl is really a treasure,” said the little old lady to

herself. "I only hope I shall not find out something dreadful about her before long."

For Annie herself the time passed not all unhappily. Work she did, from morning to night, conscientiously, willingly; for the most part silently. If it were a dull life, she honestly felt she might expect nothing better. For her pleasures she had the Book the Sisters had given her, and the consciousness of doing right; besides which there was ever the grateful remembrance of Mr. Netherwood's parting words of trust, and ever the thought of the child.

At the end of the first year was fought the first battle for a privilege hitherto withheld. Annie begged for one night off during the week, that she might see the child more frequently. Mrs. Holt flushed very red, and said that she would mention the matter to Mr. Holt, but that she had not the slightest hope of obtaining his consent. Annie said no more about it that week, but the next, with her customary quietude of voice and manner, she asked again. Mrs. Holt replied that she had spoken to Mr. Holt, but that he considered the asked-for privilege quite unnecessary.

"Could I have an afternoon?" urged Annie. "I'd like that better. Baby don't alwis seem to know me, an' sometimes he's gone to bed. If he see me offener, ma'am, he wouldn't forget."

Mrs. Holt shook her head.

Every afternoon brought its work, she said, and work *must* be done.

Annie asked no more, but being impressed with the reasonable nature of her request, she wrote to Sister Elizabeth, who in her turn wrote Mrs. Holt to the effect that unless Annie Deane were allowed to visit her child every Wednesday afternoon she would be removed from Merryon Square. The Sister further added that the girl's wages were, in her opinion, insufficient for the amount of work executed by her. She had been in receipt of three shillings a week. At the end of her year would Mrs. Holt make it four?

Mrs. Holt sought her husband and asked him tragically if he thought such impudence had ever been heard of in the memory of man? Mr. Holt answered cheerfully that perhaps the like *had* been heard of, but that he was not quite sure. The old lady trotted about, and called Heaven and Earth to witness how shamefully she was imposed upon by everybody.

"But, my love," interposed the little man soothingly, "after all, it amounts to this: Is the girl worth four shillings a week,

or is she not? As a matter of fact, have you not paid much more for much less in return?"

Instead of being grateful for having the matter thus presented to her, Mrs. Holt protested that the last straw had been inflicted upon the back of the proverbial camel.

"Of all things, this is the hardest!" said she. "To think that girl should have the power to sow discord between us."

But Annie's wages were raised, and her Wednesday afternoons were spent with the child.

"Although I must say, Emma," said Mrs. Holt, "that I resent the Sister's meddling. In future you and I must manage our own affairs."

Annie's second year in Merryon Square wore away in like fashion to the first. Had she chosen, she might have been a power in the house, but she did not even perceive her opportunity. Silent, diligent, and respectful, patient and unresentful under petty impositions and the sting of trust withheld, she went on trying so to work out her own salvation, and with that—*his*.

Mrs. Holt's dread of discovering something bad in the girl gave place to a dread of something happening to deprive her of her services.

"She has only two faults," the old lady told Mr. Netherwood once, "she is 'deep' and very miserly."

"Miserly?" repeated he.

"Miserly. She had some money when she came here, and I am sure she has never spent a shilling since. Of course, I give her little things in the way of clothes, and she has no necessity to buy much; but for a girl of nineteen to hoard her pence until they are shillings, and then to put them in the Savings Bank, seems unnatural."

Mr. Netherwood remarked that at least the girl had wisdom on her side.

But wisely or unwisely, Annie saved every penny available for saving; mended, patched, and contrived until her modest wardrobe was something to marvel at for ingenuity, and was only daunted by shoe-leather, which lends itself not to the skill of the repairing amateur.

As to her motives for economy—was there not the child? and at the end of two years had he not to be paid for? Concerning that there was a consultation between Mr. Netherwood and Sister Elizabeth, at which it was decided that they should

keep the child free of expense to the mother until she was one-and-twenty.

"For," said the Sister, "I certainly have great hope of her. She is a splendid servant, and might easily be doing better than she is. But for the safety which lies in quietude and plenty of hard work, I should remove her. Mrs. Holt is kind, but exacting—a sort of unintentional Shylock. The girl has been there two years; I must see that she has a rise."

After which there was another squabble in Merryon Square, but Annie's bank-book looked up.

Then the months rolled by, completing the third year; and again, completing the fourth.

Annie Deane was a woman of twenty-one, with a bright-eyed little laddie of four to call her mother, and to touch her grey life with the reflection of a brightness it had never known.

For her life was monotonous enough. Although she was a pretty woman, no man fell in love with her; although as time went on she went her way through the busy streets at all times of the day or night, when her business demanded, no one molested her, nor made her the heroine of any little romance. When she rose in the morning to face another day, and when, tired out, she went to bed at night, she had but the one purpose in front of her—to work out her own salvation, that the sin of her ruin might not be laid at that man's door, and to bring up his boy so that if ever they met he might not be ashamed of him.

This was the aim and purpose of her life.



## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE SHADOW ON THE TURF

ANNIE always remembered the close of her fifth year in Merryon Square, because it brought with it a break in the monotony of things.

"Five years to-day," said Mrs. Holt, as she entered the kitchen that sunny July morning. "Dear me, Emma, we're getting quite old friends, aren't we?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Annie soberly.

"And I hope we shall be friends for another five," quoth the old lady briskly.

"Thank you, ma'am," was the quiet response.

"Here is a little present for you," holding out half-a-sovereign. "I know you would rather have money than anything else. Be sure you do not—a—not mention it in any way, because Mr. Holt thinks me so terribly extravagant."

Annie said "Thank you, ma'am" again, and followed Mrs. Holt upstairs with the tray.

After breakfast Mr. Holt shuffled stealthily into the kitchen, with a boot in each hand.

"I will have these boots this morning, Emma," said he, in a state of suppressed agitation; "take them quick. Feel in this one—no, in *this* one—there's something for you. Don't mention it to Mrs. Holt—she will think me extravagant, and don't drop it—it's half-a-sovereign."

Having jerked out which, he shuffled off with a look of unconcern on his merry little face that would not have deceived a baby.

Left alone in the kitchen, Annie actually laughed.

It was not the first time she had assisted at small domestic deceptions of the kind, but they invariably made her uncomfortable. As she put the coins away she wished the givers had been honest with each other; for the touch of dishonesty made those coins worth less than the ones she worked for. Perhaps that thought made her less diligent, perhaps overworked Nature pined for a rest; be that as it may, Annie Deane stood

idly at her kitchen window, then, still idly, opened it, thereby admitting the scent of the jessamine which straggled over the dining-room balcony above.

"Oh!" said the Berkshire-bred girl to herself, "how I'd like to take Lin over the fields into the wood this mornin'! My dear little boy what's never seen the country in his life."

For once work went hardly with her. She was possessed by a longing for the old fir woods, for the pine-needles ankle-deep underfoot, for the furze and bracken, for the once-despised wild flowers, whose hiding-places she knew; for the sights and sounds of country life, common enough once, and so of little value, but hallowed now by memory, and sanctified by the glamour which surrounds the irrecoverable.

"I'll go!" she burst out suddenly, "I'll go! I don't care about this money. It won't make much difference in the end, so I'll spend it to show Lin the woods and the flowers and things, if it's on'y for a day."

She took Mrs. Holt's breath away by announcing that she wanted to go down into Berkshire, and to take the boy.

"What an extraordinary thing!" cried the old lady. "Oh, Emma, you don't mean to come back. Now I see what you have been saving up for."

"Please, ma'am, I means to come back the same night."

"Ridiculous! Just think of the expense. Why, you would have to work for a month to make it up. I must ask Mr. Holt. I am sure he will advise you not to waste money in that way."

But the old man said:

"I will look at the railway bills this morning as I pass a station. There may be excursions."

It happened that there *were* excursions, and that the fares were reasonable. So one glorious morning, while London was still rubbing its eyes, Annie trudged to St. Saviour's Schools for the purpose of fetching the boy, and long before nine was travelling towards Berkshire.

Lin knelt upon the seat of the carriage, flattening his sharp little nose against the window-pane, while his mother, stirred more deeply than she had been for years, watched the flying, sun-steeped, shadow-haunted landscape with eyes still beautiful with youth's inimitable beauty. For so long life had seemed stagnant with her, but that morning's rush through the flower-starred meadows, by belts and clumps of shaded wind-tossed trees, by rippling sunlit streams and swelling hill-sides, down which the scurrying, cloud-

shadows ran races, woke the sense of enjoyment within her, making her young again. She put one arm about the boy, and held him closely. Her boy! her boy and—*his*! As her youth woke in her, the love which had made and marred it woke too with redoubled strength and intensity; she seemed to be travelling back again to that solitary summer of *his* making, which at his bidding had darkened into winter, wherein was no light of the sun. Her sense of association with him rather strengthened than diminished as time went by, nor could the silence which wrapped him about kill her conviction that the chain of events would end by bringing them face to face. Not that she dreamed of any purely selfish benefit consequent upon such renewed intercourse; she had by this time made out enough of men and their ways to abandon all thought of personal reparation.

"He'd never think much o' *me*," she would say to herself cheerfully; "that ain't to be expected. But he wus kind-hearted, an' he'd take to the boy if on'y I can manage to bring him up so as he wouldn't be ashamed of him."

It was barely half-past ten when the train steamed into the little-used station of Annie's native village. No one but she and her boy alighted there, and she felt conspicuous. She was wearing a close bonnet, round which, for concealment's sake, she had tied an old veil of Mrs. Holt's, but the sleepy station-master looked her up and down as he broke her ticket in two and gave her the return half; also he walked out of his little shelter to watch her down the road.

"Now, there goes that gal o' Deane's," said he to himself. "If it isn't, I never see her. Often I've wondered what become o' that gal, an', sure enough, that's her."

Annie walked briskly on, feeling sure that the man had recognised her, and being much agitated in consequence.

Lin was in high glee, chasing a butterfly—such a brilliant red-and-black thing as he had never seen in his life; but when it fluttered to a big marsh-mallow leaf and settled there, he held his open hand back and let it alone.

"It'd be a pity to touch it, wouldn't it, mother?" he whispered. "It's out for a holiday, like us. We wouldn't like some great big thing to come and pick us up, would we?"

Annie smiled.

"Let it alone," she said, "it's hurtin' nobody, Lin, and God made it."

Lin nodded as he watched the butterfly flutter away. He was used to this compassion for dumb things on the part of

quiet mother who so seldom spoke her thoughts to anybody but him.

"We're goin' through this gate into the wood," she said softly. "Never mind them things, dear; we'll get lots of cones in here."

He pushed the gate wide for Lin to pass through. He turned to her as she followed him.

"Can anybody turn us out?" inquired he under his breath.

"I don't think they will, dearie. I don't suppose we'll lose a soul."

Lin did not say so, though they wandered about the wood for some time, sometimes almost lost in the dark heart of it, sometimes coming to the edge of open country, and again returning only the high hedge divided them from the main road. At noon they ate the lunch Annie had brought with them, then the child stretched himself on the moss and the mother sat and dreamed.

Lin's mother sat and dreamed, with a tranquil smile on her face and in her heart the hush of a great content. To a country-bred girl, who had been working for five years in the ground kitchens of a London house, it was something to be so near heaven.

Lin woke up refreshed, to find himself in a veritable Land of enchantment. For a moment he thought that mother and himself must be dead and transported to the heaven they had told him about at school. But he quickly remembered that this was not of the eternal sort—was, in fact, to be enjoyed only for the day only, so he sat up and opened his bright eyes wide to take it all in. To look up through the pines to the golden palaces above, to catch the flash of a wood-pigeon's silver in the light, to hear the tender coo of the beautiful thing hid itself in the dark trees, or the sharper note of a startled bird resting at "high-noon," to see a furry brown squirrel long a tree-branch close by and disappear before one could say he was there—all these things were wonders to the young child, and took away from him his wonted desire to be alone. Who could chatter in the solemn hush of those long, moveless pines?

And when he was quite tired of looking up, there was so much to be seen by looking down. Lin made himself a fairy ring of dry fir-branches and bracken, carpeted it with moss and roofed it in with fir-cones. Never was child so delighted as he with the everyday surroundings of the young rustic. His eyes were filled as she watched him.

"We never used to think nothing o' the woods," she thought, "when we was youngsters; we'd rather play wi' the dust an' stones in the road. Oh, how I'd like mother to see him; he's such a pretty little child, an' he's got a *bettermost* look about him, quite diff'rent to our Ben an' Ted an' Dick. I would like 'em to see him. I meant to go when I started; but now I'm so close, I dursent! If they'd ever said anything about bein' pleased to see me it wouldn't look so hard, but they never has. I couldn't take Lin to let him see I wusn't wanted."

Still, as the day wore on her hankering after that cottage midway up the village street was only kept in check by the doubt of the reception its inmates would accord her.

"Sure they'd be *pleased* to see me," she mused wistfully. "I don't want nothing of 'em, an' I'm goin' back to-night. Still, there's Alice old enough to understand, an' p'r'aps mother wouldn't know what to say. It'd break my heart if I took the child there and didn't get no welcome."

So, try as she might, she could not summon sufficient courage to take her beyond the wide turf-ride which skirted the wood. Each time she heard someone coming she hurried the boy back into hiding. This naturally startled him, made him apprehensive of he knew not what, and caused him to tire of the quiet place. Also, he grew thirsty. All the milk in the ginger-beer bottle was gone, and Annie had thrown the bottle away. Some bread and butter remained and an odd remnant of cake, but Lin wanted neither. He was not fretful, nor importunate, but he was getting tired, had had enough of the country for one day, and pined in secret for his "tea."

"Couldn't we go and find some water?" he said, with a child's tired wriggle, "I am so thirsty!"

Annie stopped, and her colour mounted high.

"Come along, darlin'," she said suddenly, "you shall have a drink. We'll go and find one."

The child's face brightened, and he trotted briskly by his mother's side. She crossed the turf-path, went down a grassy slope, lifted Lin over a wire fence, and got through herself, then crossed a wide meadow to a half-open gate.

"Now, don't be frightened," she said, in a tremor of excitement; "I'm going to stand here while you runs down to that little house there an' ast them for a drink o' water."

"Which house?" said the child doubtfully.

"The little white one, with the clean doorstep. The door's

pretty sure to be open, but if it isn't you've on'y to knock—they're safe to come."

Too thirsty to be shy, Lin ran across the road, halted, and sidled along to the door.

"Knock if it's shut," called his mother eagerly.

Lin knocked, and was seen by Annie to step over the threshold, after which he entirely disappeared. What his mother endured for the next few minutes she could not have told. What was the child doing? Were they asking him questions? If they asked him his name and he told them it was Deane, would they guess, and so come out to look for her? She stood, half-hidden by the hedge, wondering why the boy was so long. If he saw nobody about, would he go through the little "back-house" into the garden? And oh! horrors! would he tumble down the well? Her heart stood still at that thought, and she was on the point of rushing across the road when Lin reappeared at the door, followed by Mrs. Deane, who was laughing as she wiped her hands on her apron.

"Look," said Lin, in his childish Cockney treble, "there's mother up the road by that gate. I told you I wasn't alone."

Mrs. Deane laughed again, watched the boy as he ran across to the half-hidden figure by the gate, and called "Good-bye" as he reached it.

"Good-bye," responded Lin, at the top of his voice. "I said 'Thank you,' didn't I? Mother's afraid I forgot. Good-bye."

Annie slid through the gate and pushed it "home." She was afraid to face the road to fasten it properly, for her mother still stood at the open door.

"I had a nice drink out of the well," said Lin, as he trotted over the meadow. "I saw them pull it up in the bucket, and wasn't it cold? What made me such a long time gone? I went with a funny old man to see the little pigs next door. I shouldn't like to have pigs in my garden, 'less it was pigs that didn't smell. These did, dreadful!"

Annie hurried the child across the meadow with an odd sensation of being followed. At the fence on the outskirts of the wood, she ventured to look back. There was not a soul in sight. Her heart slowed down.

"Did they ast you who you wus?"

"They asked me my name."

"What did you tell them?"

"I said it was Lin."

"Did anybody kiss you?"

"The woman did, and so did the funny old man. He said I was a nice little gentleman, and spoke up according to my size."

The foolish mother smiled with sudden pleasure.

"A little gentleman!" This was what *his* boy should be if any exertion of hers could bring it about.

"Didn't you see anybody else there?"

"A little girl just bigger than me."

"That must have bin Kate. No, she's eight now, or nine, p'raps; it must have bin Maggie."

Lin looked puzzled.

"Do you know the people in that house, mother?" said he, looking up at her quiet face.

"Yes, dear. The woman what come to the door wi' you wus my mother, an' that's where I lived when I wus little like you."

"And who was the little man with his legs tied up? The little man that took me to see the pigs?"

"My father, dearie, an' your gran'father."

"Then why didn't you go in with me?"

She shook her head without answering.

The boy, never tiresomely inquisitive, considered; but his consideration led to nothing more important than the discovery of a private and personal distaste for little old men who wore red handkerchiefs round their necks, and tied up their legs with string. The two presently sat down to eat the remainder of their provisions, then Annie took the boy on her lap and wiled away the time by telling him about the rabbits that hopped about in the wood when the sun had gone to bed; about the yellow flags that grew farther up the stream, whose ceaseless rippling wash they could hear from where they sat; about the coops of young pheasants that were enclosed in wire netting to keep people away from where they were; and presently as she was telling him how thickly the nuts grew on the belt of hazels "just over there," there was a sudden clucking, then a whizz and a "whir-r!" And over against them a glorious cock-pheasant rose, to sail away down the red stream of the sunset light, glittering and gleaming like a bird all set with jewels. The wood was astir with hidden life. The coo of the pigeons sounded drowsily now and then, while the birds woke up to say good-night to the departing sun, and the bushes rustled as bird or animal scudded through. This mysterious stir only served to accentuate the loneliness of the place, and when the great golden feathers in the sky began to

turn red, and the evening breeze to sigh through the bracken and rustle the long grasses by the streamlet's edge, Lin began to get frightened, and to cling to his mother, listening.

"It's time we wus makin' for the station," she said cheerily, noticing his frightened look. "We shan't meet nobody likely to know me now, so I thinks we'll go by the road. We'll have to turn back a bit as far as the gate, but it's easier walkin' than it is in here, what wi' the roots an' the brambles."

"Let us go by the road," said Lin, only intent upon getting out of the wood.

They turned at once and made for the gate leading to the highway. As they walked on, keeping close to the hedge, for it was easier "going" there, Annie could tell that someone was walking close by in the road, and hung back a little to let that other wayfarer get ahead. At the gate she and Lin would turn to the right for the station, while the man in the road—it *was* a man, by the step—would probably continue his walk to the village. In this way she would escape observation. Knowing that she had plenty of time, she halted under pretence of tying Lin's shoes more tightly, thought she had given the man in the road time to get past the gate, and then walked on, with Lin still clinging to her, silent and nervous. In another five minutes they were at the end of the dividing hedge. The big wooden gate stood open, and across the stretch of reddened turf to the left was flung a huge, grotesque shadow—the shadow of the figure of a man. Lin saw it instantly and hung back, trembling.

"Oh, look there!" he whispered, pointing to it. "What is that, mother?"

"On'y a gentleman, dear," she whispered back, keeping close to the sheltering hedge, for she was foolishly startled herself.

"Is it a *giant*, mother? It's not like a man."

"Nonsense, darlin'. It's the sun bein' low that makes his shadow big like that. He's standin' still in the road. Keep quiet. We'll stop here till he've passed on."

But she counted twenty by the loud beating of her heart, while the child stood clinging to her skirts in fear, and still the dark shadow stretched up the reddened turf—immovable.

"I dursent show out till he've gone," thought Annie, picking up the boy, who had begun to whimper. "P'raps he's a tramp, an' heard us comin' along, an' he's waitin' to see who 'tis. If he stands there long, or comes into the woods, whatever will I do?"



But as she watched the shadow wavered, swayed, moved slowly slantwise across the gate to the hedge on the other side, then passed right out of sight, and very soon the accompanying footsteps had died away in the distance. Annie turned into the road and ran, with Lin held tightly in her arms. When she ventured to put him down and look behind there was not a human being in sight.

"There!" she said, laughing at herself as well as at Lin, "we're not a quarter of an hour from the station now, an' I think the train's due in little more than that. Don't be silly, darlin'. It was nothink but a man standin' in the road." But the child could tell that she had been startled too, and nothing short of the station lights put him at his ease.

They slipped into the dark shelter on the platform to wait, and although the station-master walked past several times, he could not feel quite certain that the woman in the thick veil was Dan'l Deane's missing daughter. The train was not overfull, and Annie, lifting the boy so as to hide her own face, entered a compartment quickly and sat back in a corner.

Lin fell asleep almost as soon as the train was in motion. Annie held him tightly while she watched the flying landscape, watched the twilight and the moonlight struggle for mastery, while one pale green star hung trembling over the dark belt of firs which hid her native village. She had re-visited the old scenes after an absence of five long years, but had not had the courage to find out whether or not the door of the old home was still shut against her.

"I'd have gone if I'd bin alone," she thought sadly; "but how *could* I go, an' take the boy?"

A little later she was rumbling through the stuffy London streets in a stuffier London 'bus, gently trying to wake Lin, who was heavy, and had sadly tired even her work-strengthened arms. But Lin was under the influence of country air, and would not wake, so with a basket on one arm and a child in both, this jovial holiday-maker stumbled out of a 'bus in the Camden Road, and turned from there into Merryon Square. Lin's school being at the other side of London, he was to stay with his mother for that night. Once or twice she stopped to rest her arms by putting one foot on a friendly doorstep and shifting the sharp handle of the basket, but at last she shut the area-gate of No. 19 behind her, and cautiously descended the dark flight of steps.

The old people had gone to bed, leaving a tiny jet of gas burning, but nothing by way of supper. Annie only stopped

rub her arms and to lock the area-door, then she carried Lin up to bed. She was very soon beside him, tired out and decidedly hungry, with her one holiday in five years at an end, but happy enough for all that. The boy had had a long day in the country, had seen the woods and the fields, and heard the birds sing.

When all was still, and Annie was just falling asleep, Lin—child-like—turned and woke up.

"Are we home, mother?"

"Yes, darlin'," said she, afraid he was going to ask for something to eat. "Go to sleep, there's a dear, becose' mother's very tired, an' have got to get up so early to-morrow mornin'."

Lin lay quiet for a minute or two, then whispered fearfully:

"But that was a *big* shadow, wasn't it, mother?"

And, strange to say, of all the sights and sounds with which the child had that day made acquaintance, the memory of that dark shadow, thrown by the setting sun upon the turf, was the memory which stayed with him—which made upon him a deep impression never to be quite effaced.

## CHAPTER XIX

"YOU HAVE AN ELDER SISTER?"

AND yet it was nothing more uncanny than the shadow of an ordinary mortal, who was clad in ordinary fashion, and who—if appearance goes for anything—was a gentleman. Anyway, he was a lover of beauty, wherever he chanced to find it, and he found it that night in the stretch of sunlit sward where it gently sloped upward to the fir-clad hill. A hen-pheasant was strutting about, and he stood to watch her, thinking what a pretty thing she was, and all unmoved by any desire for slaughter. But then he had no gun, had nothing more destructive than a stick, which was of the business-like order, and had evidently seen some service.

He had heard voices and footsteps on the other side of the thick hedge, but had lost them again; and when the pheasant, rising, passed out of sight, he resumed his walk to the village, quite unaware of the effect his shadow had had upon the woman and child standing in hiding but a few feet away. At the entrance to the village street he halted to look about him, then went on afresh until he came to the inn. He remembered the inn, having some years before spent a few nights there. He went in now, had half a bottle of soda-water and some brandy, noted that the house had changed hands, chatted for five minutes or so with the landlady, found she knew little or nothing of the humble people about her, and drifted out again to the twilight street, presently finding himself at the end of it. Here he stopped, and was on the point of turning back, when the sound of a blacksmith's hammer rang out sharply close at hand. He turned on his heel and made for the forge, which lay to his left, with a sloping green in front, and the blacksmith's cottage at the side of it. Evidently the last habitation in the village, for the high road stretched away beyond without a break. A spick-and-span cottage was the blacksmith's, with newly-painted door and windows, with white curtains upstairs and down, and a general air of prosperity everywhere. In the doorway stood a girl, who

turned her head to watch the stranger as he passed. He gave her a keen glance, then another, and yet another. In two minutes he re-passed. Then he stopped, took a cigarette from his case, went across the green to the cottage door, lifted his hat, and asked the girl in the doorway to give him a light. It was done with the ease of a man who is accustomed to take his welcome wherever he chooses to go—done without a trace of hesitation or fussiness. The girl disappeared, staying inside the house long enough to let her risen colour cool down, then returned to the door with a box of matches.

"Thank you!"

He struck a match, lit the cigarette, then, holding it between the second and third fingers of his ungloved hand, said pleasantly:

"Is your name Deane?"

"It *was* Deane, sir, but—"

"Ah!" he flashed a look at her left hand and smiled; "but it is not Deane now, I see."

"Yes, sir, I've been married three months."

He nodded.

"Is your father still living here?"

"Yes, sir, they lives at the further end of the village—the last house but three you come to."

"I don't want to see him particularly; in fact, I want a little information which I would much rather obtain from someone else—from *anyone* else, indeed, who is in a position to give it me. You have an elder sister?"

The girl's manner altered at once. She suddenly stiffened from head to foot.

"Yes, sir."

"Is she—a—married?"

"No, sir."

"I thought she married, say, between five and six years ago."

"No. She left here for good about that time, but she didn't *marry*," with a touch of emphasis on the last word, apparently meant to convey that for such an one as that elder sister marriage was an unattainable dignity.

The stranger put his cigarette between his lips just long enough to keep it alight, then said:

"Will you tell me *why* she went away?"

The girl drew herself up more stiffly still, and averted her face from her questioner's keen eyes.

"Well, sir, perhaps I might if I knew what right you had to

come and ask me about such a thing, or if it was a fit subject for anyone to talk of to a stranger."

He took no notice of the rebuff, only spoke more earnestly.

"I know it *is* an odd subject for a chance conversation, but upon my honour I have no wish to offer you insult. I am not a boy, and you are a married woman. I asked you a question, an important question. If you will not answer it, where is someone who will?"

She coloured with annoyance at the stranger's lack of interest in her as a woman—as a pretty woman. She answered nothing.

"Can I see your husband?"

"Jim's gone to Readin'," she said, "and won't be home till past ten. I daresay you could see him in the morning."

"Jim!" The stranger started, repeating the name to himself. Jim—Jim *what*? Why, of a surety, Drake! Was not Annie's old sweetheart the son of the blacksmith hereabouts? Had that same sweetheart consoled himself by marrying Annie's sister? The stranger dropped his cigarette in the dust and trod upon it. Certain it was that he did not want to see Jim Drake!

"I shall not be here to-morrow," he said, "and I think you might tell me what I want to know."

"What do you want to know?"

"Why your sister left here as she did. I promised a friend of mine to make inquiries concerning her, and I must keep my promise."

"Well, then, sir, she left here because she was a downright bad girl, and was more trouble to her poor old father and mother than all the rest of us put together."

"Where did she go from here?"

"She went to Readin'."

"What to do there?"

"I don't know. I was a bit of a child, not fifteen, so you may be sure as mother was not likely to say more to me about it than she could help."

"Where is your sister now?"

"*That* I can't tell you."

He looked at her keenly.

"Is it possible?" he asked slowly.

"Yes. She's never been back. For though we are not very high, we're respectable, sir, and she's the only one of my father's name or mother's either that ever disgraced it. I, for one, don't care to remember that she belongs to us at all."

"But surely you know what she did when she left home?"

**"She went into service; that is, I believe she did."**

**"What, straight into service at once? Was she in a condition to do that?"**

**"I don't know."**

He went closer, and looked her in the face.

**"I think you do,"** he said quietly. **"Come now, you are her sister after all; happier and more fortunate than she, I am sure, but that need not make you hard upon her. You were children together, and you must have had some little affection for her once. Now, if I tell you that the man who once did her a grievous wrong would like to make her some amends, will you tell me where to find her? He cannot set things right—that is, of course, impossible; but he might atone to her somewhat. Anyway, he would like to try."**

Mrs. Blake's colour died out. Her eyes sought the stranger's face, and dwelt there. It was a fascinating face, with strongly-cut features and peculiar eyes, set a thought unevenly and near the nose. A pleasant face, a lovable face, but as she looked at it Mrs. Alice Drake was stirred by sudden and unreasonable dislike.

She had always disliked the sister whose abrupt departure from home had thrown the care of the younger children upon her—a care to which she had never taken kindly, thinking it "beneath" her. Considering herself in every way superior to her meeker elder sister, she had never forgiven her father for once having surveyed her critically when she had presented herself at home after a few months' absence.

**"Eh—h, Alice,"** he had said regretfully, **"ye may be a finer growed gal, but ye'll never be such a pretty 'un as your sister Annie."**

That miserably-petty recollection cropped up even now. In two minutes the blacksmith's young wife had measured her new acquaintance from his sunburnt face to his slender, well-kept hands, and from there to his dusty boots.

**"You're a swell,"** thought Mrs. Alice Drake, **"and you're the man. You 'promised a friend' indeed!—your conscience pricked you, more likely! Why should I tell you where she is? Shall I? Now—shall I? No, that I won't. Let her work as she ought to work, and think herself lucky that people can be found who are willing to give her the chance. You'd go and provide for her, perhaps take the child away and bring him up as a gentleman. No, madame Annie, I'll spoil that game, if I can. Even Jim 'll never forget you. He only married me because I was a bit like you."**

These reflections took up little time. The man who stood facing Mrs. Drake was unaware of any awkward pause in the conversation.

"You will tell me," he said again persuasively, "where to find her?"

"I can't, sir."

"You mean that you don't know?"

She nodded.

"But your people know—your mother surely knows?"

"Not any more than I know. I'll tell you: She went from Readin' to London, and it was a long time before mother heard a word of her. Then she had a letter from some Home or other, saying that Annie was all right, and was being looked after by some clergyman. I don't remember his name. Mother sent an answer, but—but—let me see, now. Did she ever hear from her since, or was that the last time? I really am not quite sure."

She paused, apparently rummaging about in the recesses of her memory for something half-forgotten. The stranger waited, eyeing her attentively.

"I really don't think she did write again," she resumed thoughtfully, "only once just to say good-bye, and that was some time after."

"To say 'good-bye'?"

"Yes; she—what is it you call it?—emigrated. Well! that's the last we know of her."

Having jerked out which statement, she darted a shifty look at the stranger's face, and saw there incredulity "writ large."

"Surely you know where she went?"

"To where they mostly do go—America, Canada, somewhere there. I don't know nothing more than that. I daresay," she went on a trifle eagerly, "that it seems unlikely to you."

"It *does* seem unlikely," he said quietly.

"Because you can't enter into our father and mother's feelings. You've no idea what letter-writin' means to poor folks who've not had much schoolin'. I'm sure I'm pretty right in sayin' that them one or two letters mother wrote our Annie was the only letters she ever wrote in her life. And Annie was never much good at learnin'. Mother used to say that there was some good in sendin' *me* to school, but it was jest wastin' money on Annie. She was always sort of stupid, I used to say, and sure enough she showed I was right."

"But even stupidity would not account for her going to Canada without reference to her parents."

"Where there's no sense there's no feelin', they say, and there was precious little in her. You see, sir, I can't go through it all to show you how that disgrace parted Annie from our folks. Talk of feelin'! Why, she let father and mother take us children's very food money to get her into Readin'! She let mother break open our little money-boxes a' purpose to go and see her, when all the while she'd got plenty of money in her pocket, give her by them as bad as herself!"

"How do you know that?"

"Because she run away that same night as our mother come home with the baby, and before she went she changed a five-pound note. It was as much the thought o' that as anything which set our folks against her, for they could see what a bad, hard-hearted thing she was. So when they once found that she was all right, they jest washed their hands of her, and said that she'd made her own bed, and must lay on it. They'd got us others to think about, and so they let her go."

"She appears to have been willing."

"More likely sulky, I expect. When she found she was not to come back here just as she liked, she went off in a pet without sayin' where."

It seemed very uncharitable and wretched, but it was certainly very likely. The stranger gave a dreary shrug and half-turned on his heel.

"Well, there is still one point to be cleared up, and that the main one. Did your sister emigrate alone?"

"Don't a lot usually go together?"

"That is not what I mean. Has she anyone to keep besides herself? As a matter of fact, was there not—a—a—*child*?"

Mrs. Alice Drake went a little faint, and swallowed a lump in her throat.

"If there was," she said, leaning hard against the door-frame, "there isn't now. It was that part of it what mother kept to herself, but children's ears are mostly open to what's no good to them, and after that first letter from Annie I heard mother say something to father about it's bein' a mercy that the child was took, because it'd give Annie a better chance o' gettin' on."

Her listener's intent brows relaxed.

"They meant that the child was dead?"

Mrs. Drake's lips were pale, and she answered with difficulty.

"Of course, that must have been what they meant."

"Ah!"

He gave a long sigh, whether of relief or regret it was impossible to say. After a pause he said:



"I might as well take the name of that Home you mentioned. Your sister, of course, emigrated from there."

"I don't think so. Mother wanted to write there, to be sure, about it, but she'd burnt the bit of paper that had the address on, and she's a poor memory for anything like that. Of course, if you'd like to see mother, I've told you where they live; but I don't suppose she'd go into it with you like I've done, and it'd upset her dreadful, I know."

"No doubt. I don't think I will trouble her. There is nothing more to be said. I am much indebted to you for your patience. I thank you very sincerely. Good-night!"

He lifted his hat, walked sharply across the green on to the road, and Mrs. Drake saw him no more.

But when he had passed the last house, and there was nothing in front of him but the dim and lonely road, he slackened his pace, muttering the while to himself in an oddly weary, hopeless kind of way:

"I am glad she did not drift to anything worse. I am glad that the child—died. That is, I think I am. Oh, how the devil do I know *what* I am, except that it isn't 'glad' of anything? Where's the use of finding the girl? If there had been a child I would have taken it—would have let the whole world know it was mine; but the child is provided for, and for the girl herself—she will be far, far better without further attention from me. Well, I have done what I could, which turns out to be—nothing."

He stood still in the darkening road, while a circling bat flew past and past him.

"Shall I go back and tell *her* what I've done?" he burst out excitedly, "right back to her *now*? Surely she knows I cannot keep away for ever. If only I could make her see! How did I know what womanhood meant until she taught me? I was a fool, groping in the dark. I did not know; before God and my own conscience, I say, I did not *see* the horror of the thing I did. And now that I do see—"

He threw back his head and laughed, but the laugh had a ring in it like the cry of a broken heart. It startled even him. He walked on, still muttering to himself, for he was in bitter trouble, and trouble until now had so comfortably passed him by.

"Now that I do see, what is there left for me but to wish myself blind again, that I might do as other men do, and be content. If only I hadn't loved her quite so well! And if only she were not so very well worth loving! And if only she had not thought I was worth it too! Oh! after all, what is it?"

Nothing but what every fool feels *once* in his pitiful life time—

"Of love  
That never found its earthly close, what sequel?  
Streaming eyes and breaking hearts? or else the  
Same as if it had not been?"

"Why 'the same as if it had not been,' after a few months. What is it but a disease—a touch of raging fever, bad to bear but never fatal, and in a short time—over! What is it?" He stopped and ground his heel deep into the yielding road. "What is it? Oh! where's the use of denying it? My God! my God! It's just too hard to bear!"

A day or two after that the old station-master met Dan'l Deane, and stopped him.

"Well, Dan'l," he said, "and how is the world using you?"

"Fairish, thankee," responded Dan'l mildly, "fairish."

"Did I dream that I saw somebody belongin' to you a day or two ago? Somebody that went away some five years back?"

"You must ha' bin dreamin', Master Robins."

"I certainly did see her."

"What, my gal Annie? No. She've never bin home. She's all right and well, thank God, but it's a long way off is London, an' travellin' means money. Besides, there's the women-folks, and they don't *forgive* one another much, Master Robins."

"That's true, Dan'l. I must have been mistaken. But a young woman of just the same stamp as her got out of the excursion train that run through here from Waterloo to Reading last Tuesday. She fought very shy of lookin' me in the face, and she had a little boy with her about five or six years old. They stayed somewhere here for the day, and caught the train again at night. I can't say that I got a real good look at her, but I cert'n'y thought it was your gal."

Unsuspecting Dan'l only shook his head.

"It warn't her," he said, "Lor' bless ye, no."

But when he went indoors he told his wife of Master Robins' fancy. She dropped on a chair and threw up her hands.

"An', depend on it, it *wus* our Annie," she cried; "ay, that it wus! An' that little feller what come in here asting for a *drink wus* her boy."

"Why, that's nonsense, missus—where was *she*?"

"I see her—I see her myself. She stood up the road against Hobbs's pasture gate, sort o' back behind the gate-post, an' when the child run back to her, though I warn't close enough to see her face, I noticed the lot o' hair—light hair, ye know, Dan'l—out at the back of her bonnet, an' thinks I to myself, 'Lor', that young person's got a head like our gals', like our Annie's an' our Alice's.' But little did I think she'd bin wand'rin' around here all day not likin' to come into her own home! An' to think that wus her little lad! My poor gal! I'd ha' bin that pleased to see her; an' for her to go away without as much as a cup o' tea."

Mrs. Deane picked up the corners of her apron and burst out crying. She was still crying when a hand tapped at the window, and then pushed open the door.

"Anyone home?" cried Alice gaily. "Why, mother, what are you cryin' about?"

Father and mother together told "why."

At the end of the story Alice turned on her heel with an impatient sneer.

"So here you two old sillies sit and cry. Well, now, let me tell you there's nothing to cry about. Annie didn't wander about here without company, any more than she did six years ago; and what's more, she sticks to the same. So you needn't fret about her going away in want of a cup o' tea, mother. Did the child look like want?"

"Not a bit," said the mother volubly, "he looked like any lady's child, didn't he, father?"

"That he did," said Dan'l, with a touch of pride; "that he did, an' no mistake!"

"Well, he's a gentleman's child, anyway," said Alice drily, "that I *do* know, and p'raps I could tell you whose."

The mother dried her eyes.

"What *do* you mean, Alice? How long ha' you *known* what nobody else ever did find out?"

"Why, since Tuesday, when she was here, and he was here too."

"Don't be over-sharp wi' your knowin's, Alice," the father said, giving her a steady look, which she did not meet. "I'll say for you as you've got a good head for makin' up where there's anything missin', an' you ain't none too careful o' the truth o' what you sez."

"Thank you, father," said Mrs. Alice, turning red. "We all know who *you* thought the most of when we girls was in

question. There's precious little thanks in this world for a girl who knows how to behave herself. But, thank goodness, I've got a home of my own and somebody who appreciates me, though my Jim isn't a 'swell,' who wears dandy boots and turns up his trousers to show them; and though he haven't got dainty hands, with a weddin' ring on that it would have been more to his credit if he'd given away."

Alice had lost her temper, and was vixenish. Dan'l and his wife sat open-mouthed and dumb.

"I see him, and spoke to him," said Mrs. Alice, with great nonchalance; "but don't believe me if I'm not worth believin'. Ask Robins. You say he saw her. Now, just for satisfaction sake, and to clear *me*, ask him if he didn't see a man in a grey suit of clothes, with a straw hat and brown boots."

"Robins told me she got in an' got out by 'erself."

"Well, now, Robins is home to his tea. Come on, mother, don't sit frettin' there. I'll go up to his house with you, and we'll ask him."

The two women went, and surely enough, Robins did remember a gentleman corresponding with Mrs. Drake's description, who had reached the village by an evening train, and had joined the mail for London three or four hours later.

"So ye see, Alice, he warn't with her," said Mrs. Deane, in a stage whisper.

"Warn't he!" said Alice, growing coarse as she grew spiteful. "She couldn't wait anywhere up the line for his train, could she? It was very likely that them two'd come into this place arm-in-arm, wasn't it? or go out of it either!"

Robins suddenly let his tilted chair forward and slapped his knee.

"Now I know where I've seen him before!" he cried. "Only that summer before your gal left here did that same gent—lookin' a good bit younger then—come up and down this 'ere line for weeks most ev'ry day. An' it did fairly puzzle me to think what he was doin' here."

"You're sure it *was* the same man, Mr. Robins?"

"Certain sure," said Robins; as, indeed, he was.

"Well, mother, now p'raps you'll believe me. Annie went starvin' for a cup o' tea, didn't she? And you ought to fret your poor old heart about a deservin' girl like her, didn't you? She hankers after home as much as I do after Queen Victoria. Service, indeed! So am I in service, as much as she is, and more!"

Mrs. Deane saw the matter through her daughter's spectacles, and presently Dan'l saw it through his wife's.

"I think I settled that," said Mrs. Alice Drake. "But he must almost have passed her on the road. Now, that part of it I can't make out."

## CHAPTER XX

### "LINDSAY LE QUESNE, THE FAMOUS TENOR"

"I HAD a great surprise yesterday," said Mrs. Holt, when she entered the kitchen the morning after Annie's holiday. "Mr. Holt and I had made up our minds to rough it yesterday. We were going to dine down here just as we could, and then about twelve up 'drove a cab. 'Dear heart alive,' I said, 'who's that? I knew somebody would call to-day. Somebody always does when one is in a muddle.' You have heard me speak of my niece, Mrs. Kemble, have you not?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"We brought her up, you know. I may be a little partial, but I have always said that I never, *never* saw such a pretty girl as Georgie was. Her present husband followed her about for weeks until he found out where she lived. Then he called upon us and told us how much he admired her. Well, you see, she had nothing, dear child, and he came of such a high family. We thought it a wonderful marriage for her; but I don't quite know whether we were right. Do you remember me going to Southampton to see her when they were going abroad? That is three years ago, and now they are in London, so she embraced the first opportunity of coming to see us. So thoughtful of her! She brought her children—two such lovely creatures! You can guess how vexed I was that I could not receive them properly. Of course, you could not help it, but it did seem all for the purpose. She is used to such style, you know—five or six servants, and Mr. Kemble so particular. I wanted to say that Mr. Holt has been kind enough to offer to take your boy back to school this morning, because Mrs. Kemble and the children are coming, and we must have a nice dinner about three o'clock."

"Yes, ma'am," said Annie.

So it happened that Lin trotted off with the little old gentleman, and was quite surprised to find what a jolly little old gentleman he was when he was fully out of reach of his little

old lady. They had not gone far when he turned into a quiet hotel, where he had a disgustingly dirty little bottle of wine, which set Lin wondering what they would say if mother took such a thing upstairs at No. 19, where everything was so clean and shining. Then Mr. Holt had two cigars of a very special kind, one of which he lit, and the other did put most carefully into his breast pocket. He paid for his wine and cigars with what looked to Lin like a nice new farthing, but it could not have been that, because the waiter brought some change back, out of which he was permitted to keep sixpence. Lin could not quite see why he was so permitted, and gave it up as something beyond him. The boy sat on a leather-covered lounge watching the old man hold the violet wine up to the light, sniff it, taste it, nod at it in high approval, and empty one glass after another until he had emptied the bottle too, when he suddenly remembered his little charge.

"I wonder, now, if they keep cakes here," said he, with his head on one side and his fat chin between his finger and thumb. "I shouldn't be at all surprised to find that somewhere in this house there are three-cornered cakes with currants on the top; and depend upon it, we shall find them in a big glass jar."

Lin's eyes were very wide and bright as they watched the little man ring the bell, and his ears were very sharp to catch some myterious question asked of the waiter, who at once suggested "lemonade," and departing, returned with a tray bearing a long glass and a round bottle that rolled about in a foolish, helpless sort of way, and was evidently never meant to stand on its own bottom, or to take upon itself any sort of responsibility.

"Do you think he will drink *all* that?" Mr. Holt asked the waiter in an undertone.

"Well, sir, it's hard to say," responded that person blandly; "but if you're not used to children, sir, I'd advise you to keep an eye on him, merely for the sake of his own comfort, sir, afterwards. I don't see that it could do him any worse harm, sir, but it *might* make him uneasy."

"Ah, just so," said Mr. Holt solemnly, "I—I see."

So Lin, having eaten a cake, did his best to reduce the lemonade, ate another cake, returned to his "absorbing" task with deliberation, paused to take breath, had another drink, and yet one more, began to feel as if he had swallowed the bottle, and desisted.

"Perhaps you've had enough?" suggested Mr. Holt mildly.

"I haven't had enough," responded Lin, with water in his eyes, and a great tingling in his nose, "but I can't drink any more."

He slid down from the lounge and held himself up very stiffly.

"All right?" said the little old gentleman.

"Yes, sir," responded Lin bravely, feeling like a balloon somewhat over-inflated, and in imminent danger of collapse.

When they were in the street again he was thoughtful, but at last found courage to air his thoughts.

"Are *you* all right, sir?" said he innocently.

"All right, my little man? Certainly. Why?"

"Because you drank *all* your bottleful, didn't you?"

"Ah! but I'm bigger than you, and can stand more, you see."

The child nodded.

"I suppose that man was glad I couldn't finish mine. Will he go and drink it, do you think?"

"I don't expect he will. Here's our 'bus. Now, before we get in, listen to me. You are not to tell anybody that I took you anywhere or gave you anything. You will remember that, won't you?"

"Yes, sir. Mustn't I tell mother?"

"Well, no. You see, when we're out we don't tell everyone where we go. Not that there's any harm, my little man; oh, no, but we don't think proper to say anything about it, that's all. So you must remember to keep quiet, and then—some day—you may get more cakes and lemonade."

Lin was silent for some few seconds, then spoke with great earnestness.

"If I do," said he, "will you tell the man to bring mine when he brings yours? I'm sure I could have finished it if I'd begun when you did."

When Annie went into the dining-room that afternoon to lay her table, she thought the lady who stood half in the room and half on the balcony outside was the prettiest lady she had ever seen in her life. And Mrs. Kemble *was* very pretty, with a gipsy-like small face, from the forehead of which the silky uncut hair sprang in a low perfect arch; with a faultlessly-curved, vividly-coloured mouth, and a pair of long-lashed eyes, so dark that the pupils were only visible in a strong light.



Two lovely children were clinging about her as Annie entered, and she was pettishly trying to free herself, talking the while excitedly to her aunt.

"Who was to dream of there being any scarcity of money? Be quiet, Vy, what a tomboy you are! I think it is despicable in a man to lure a girl into marriage by deliberate misrepresentation of his circumstances. I say it is vile. It ought to be punishable."

"But, my love, perhaps he did not mean to deceive you."

"But he did—he *did*! or why should he not have spoken the truth? Why, when it was suggested that he should make some settlement upon me, did he get out of it by airing his ridiculous notion about the beauty of a woman's entire dependence upon her husband? I saw it all soon after we were married, when he refused me such a paltry necessary as a sealskin coat, and glazed the refusal over by saying that he believed fur to be unhealthy wear."

"Well, dear, I really believe that myself."

"Fiddlesticks! If it is, why don't three out of four rich women die? They all wear it! No, he simply could not, or would not, afford it. I am never allowed to go shopping alone since I once went into Morris's, ordered a few little things I actually needed, and told them to render him the account. Of course, I thought it only the right thing to do. Oh, auntie, there was such a row! He got out a horrid book and showed, or pretended to show, me what his income really was. I burst out at him for not telling me before. He smiled in that cruel way of his, and reminded me of a stupid thing I had once said about not wanting to know. Suppose I *had* said it! Of course, I thought he had the income of a gentleman, and he knew I thought so."

Mrs. Holt looked distressed.

"It is terribly disappointing for you, love," she said.

"Disappointing! I think it is worse than disappointing. I say the whole thing was dishonest. He married me under false pretences, and, if I could, I would have him punished for it."

"But is this true about his—comparative poverty?"

"Say comparative beggary, aunt. That is much nearer the mark."

"Then why not let the big place in the country, my dear, and live quietly somewhere else? Surely that would be cheaper?"

"Of course it would, but he says his people have always

lived there, and have managed to keep up appearances ! If we starved indoors, he would not care so long as he saw himself described as 'W. S. Kemble, of the Warren, Galloway, near Chelmsford—J.P., Esquire.' Not many months since I had notice from the only decent cook I have ever managed to find. What *do* you think she said to me ?"

"My poor dear child, I don't know."

"Why, she gave me notice, because she thought our table really did not need anything but a good 'general.' 'In fact, ma'am,' she said to me in that atrociously patronising way they assume when they know they have the upper hand, 'if I was you, I'd certainly have my dinner in the middle of the day. One good meal's worth two messin' ones, and I'm sure you and the children 'd have the benefit.' What could I say ? The woman was right."

Here Annie announced that dinner was ready, and Mrs. Kemble's domestic woes were temporarily shelved.

She came often after that ; in fact, she was in Merryon Square nearly every day, and she watched Annie with her long, brilliant eyes until the girl was uncomfortable.

"Do you know, auntie," said she one day, "that I have taken a great fancy to your maid ? She is remarkably pretty !"

"I have thought so !" exclaimed the little old gentleman unguardedly. "Now, really, I have thought that myself."

"Mr. Holt," said his little old lady, turning very pink, "when she first came here you may remember that I asked you if you thought her pretty, and you said that your sight was getting so unreliable you could not tell a pretty face from a plain one !"

"Ah, yes, my dear, but when a face is familiar it makes a difference. It—it—grows upon one, as you may say—"

"I can't see that at all," said Mrs. Holt, with a fussy dignity exactly like that of a bantam hen ; "and to talk of a servant's face *growing* upon one is—to say the least of it—very bad taste, Mr. Holt—very bad taste indeed."

Mr. Holt did not attempt to defend it, only sat rubbing his chin and looking severely snubbed.

"She is quakerish, *servantish*," Mrs. Kemble went on, "but I often look at her, and think how I should like to undo those prim plaits and see what her hair is like. It is a lovely colour, and she has such a mass of it ! Don't think me idiotic, auntie. You surely have not forgotten my love for all things beautiful ? She has been with you some time, I think ?"

"Five years, dear."

"She cooks splendidly!"

"Y-e-s. Of course, I have had to *drill* it into her, and even now I superintend every little thing."

Mrs. Kemble nodded.

"I wish I could find just such a girl. It is astonishing how much you can get out of one left to herself, and how little out of three or four. I say that you people who can manage with one servant are immensely fortunate."

Mr. Holt began to look apprehensive. Mrs. Holt saw it, and proceeded to carry into execution the exclusively feminine practice of "cutting off one's nose to spite one's face."

"Of course, we should not be justified in standing in the girl's light," she said demurely, "and if you would like to take Emma into Essex, my love, I daresay she would go with you."

The old gentleman rose from his chair to avert the impending disaster.

"My dear," he said, "you forget. Georgie knows nothing of the circumstances which led to Emma's coming here."

Mrs. Holt did not rise, but she placed her fat hands firmly on the arms of her chair, and looked at her husband with the serenity of conscious power.

"Mr. Holt," she said, "I know my duty as a Christian. Will you be good enough to attend to your own affairs?"

"Yes, yes, my love, of course. I only thought—"

And then the little man sat down, quite snuffed out and despondent.

Mrs. Kemble looked startled.

"Surely this girl is not one of your experiments, auntie?" she said. "I thought you had done with all that."

"My dear, your uncle was wrong to mention Emma's private affairs—very wrong. You know I would not let you have a girl about whom there was any doubt. If I can give her five years' exemplary character, surely you need not want to go back further than that?"

"Oh, of course, I will trust to you," said Mrs. Kemble hurriedly. "I am sure you would not let me have the girl if she were not well worth having."

Mr. Holt suppressed a sigh. Five years' peace in the kitchen at an end! Now war would be declared again, just because Georgie wanted everything she saw, as usual!

It happened that day that Georgie wanted something else. She suddenly remembered a certain kind of tea-cake, only obtainable at one shop in the Ruston Road.

"Oh, auntie," she said, "if Emma has done, can she go and

get some? I would go myself, but they would not send them in time, and I couldn't carry a big paper bag, now, could I?"

"Certainly not, love," said auntie, horrified at the suggestion. "Of course, Emma shall go."

"The children might go with her," said Mrs. Holt, but they puckered their brows and wrung their shoulders, and flatly refused, like the spoiled young savages they were. They were having a game at "tents"—that is to say, that they were up in Annie's bedroom, had pulled her bed to pieces, had tied the corners of the sheets to the brass knobs of the bedstead, and were thus laboriously "camping out." They did not want to go out with "auntie's nice Emma," and what was more they wouldn't go out, so "auntie's nice Emma" left them in possession of her private apartment and went for the tea-cakes alone.

Mrs. Kemble, reading luxuriously in her aunt's own particular chair, heard the racket above stairs.

"What damage can they do up there?" she asked after a while.

"Not much, my love," said auntie cheerfully, "if any. You sit still and have a nice rest."

But presently Mrs. Kemble reluctantly drew herself upright and listened, then threw down her book and went upstairs. She crept up the top flight and peeped round Annie's bedroom door. Tired of camping out, the children had found a new amusement. They had turned the contents of Annie's box on to the floor and were arrayed in her clothes.

"Oh, you wretches!" cried Mrs. Kemble angrily. "Why couldn't you leave that box alone? What will the girl say? Well, I am sure I can't help it. She really should have locked her box. Out of the way! I will put some of the things back, but I can't trouble to replace them all."

She collected a little heap of linen, and hastily put it at the bottom of the box.

"Oh, look, muvva!" cried four-year-old Vy. "Here's somefin' dropped out."

Saying which, the child picked up a worn envelope, and pulled therefrom two or three cheap Christmas cards and a cabinet photograph. Mrs. Kemble made a dart for these articles.

"You little monkey! You mustn't touch those things, nor open people's— Oh! how *very* extraordinary!"

She scrambled to her feet and ran downstairs.

"Auntie," she cried breathlessly, "look here! Did you ever know anything so funny?"

"What is it, love?"

"Why, look."

Mrs. Holt adjusted her spectacles, and held the portrait up to the light.

"Well, dear, who is it?" she said serenely, then.

"Don't you know?"

"Indeed I don't."

"Not when you have heard me rave about him many and many a time, until you used to say you were sick of the man's name? The children found this in your quakerish Emma's box."

"And still, my love, I haven't a notion whose portrait it is."

"Not when I once dragged you out on a fearful night on purpose to hear him? It is Lindsay Le Quesne, the tenor singer."

"Ah! I remmeber the name, but I should not recognise his portrait. I suppose you left this one at home, and Emma found it."

"No; I have mine now. Where did the girl get this, I wonder. I must run and put it back."

She had barely reached the top of the stairs, when she heard Annie enter the house. There was nothing for it but to leave the muddle untouched and apologise. She sat down on the edge of the bed to wait for the girl, who was not long in coming.

"Don't be frightened, Emma," she said, laughing; "I was hoping to get this straight before you came back, but you were too quick for me. I would apologise, but really it is your own fault for not locking your box. Evidently, you have never lived in a family where there were marauders of this sort."

"Oh, it's the childern, ma'am," said Annie smilingly; "never mind, as long as they've bin quiet."

As she spoke her eye fell upon the scattered contents of the worn envelope. Mrs. Kemble watched her.

"They have turned out all your secrets," she said lightly, "even to this portrait of a gentleman."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Annie, stretching out her hand to take the photograph.

"I was quite surprised. In my happy school-days he was one of my heroes."

"Yes, ma'am?"

"You know who he is, don't you? But of course you do."

"That I don't, ma'am," said Annie tranquilly, commencing to pick up her scattered property.

"Then what makes you keep his portrait?"

"I kep' it, ma'am, because it's so much like somebody I knowed years ago."

"Ah! I see."

Annie's face was inscrutable, her manner quite collected. She knew she was being probed, and had no intention of betraying herself by as much as a flinch. If secrecy had never been necessary before, it was necessary now.

"That is the portrait of Mr. Le Quesne," her inquisitor went on, "the famous tenor."

"What is that, ma'am?"

"Don't you know? I mean, he has a tenor voice. He is a professional singer, and considered by many to be only second to Sims Reeves."

"I don't know much about singin', ma'am."

"I suppose not. I adore music. In fact, I ought to have kept it up and followed it. My voice was good enough once. But girls are such fools—they think they must marry, if they die for it!"

Annie went on straightening her box, repeating a name to herself the while, and waiting in keen anxiety to hear it spoken again.

"You knowed the gentleman, then, ma'am?"

"Mr. Le Quesne? No, I cannot say I knew him personally. I have heard him sing, and have seen him many times. When I was an Academy student he used to come and sing for us sometimes, with other 'stars,' and was, oh, so delightfully pleasant and nice! His voice was so perfect that he took his place in the front rank without the long struggle which falls to the share of most professionals. He has been marvellously successful. I saw him only last May. He crossed from Calais to Dover in the same boat with my husband and me."

Annie's hands were mechanically replacing her tumbled belongings. Annie's heart was beating anything but mechanically.

"He was with Mdlle. Le Breton, the lady he is going to marry—*has* married by this time, I suppose."

The kneeling figure in front of the open trunk bent lower, lower, until the set, pale face was quite hidden.

"She is a singer, too," Mrs. Kemble continued, wondering whether the girl was keeping out of sight on purpose. "Her name is French, but she is English. She is even more famous

than he, and a remarkable woman in many ways—so thoroughly good and charitable! But then, she is a Roman Catholic.”

Annie spoke at last. Her voice sounded hollow, but that may have been because she was bending over her box.

“I s’pose he’s very fond of her, ma’am?”

“Fond of her! He worships her!” returned Mrs. Kemble pettishly, as if the thought of it annoyed her. “She is a beautiful woman, quite as old as he is. I watched them drive up to the pier. Her hands were full of flowers, besides those her maid carried, so in getting out of the carriage her dress caught the step and she all but fell. He caught her in his arms and laughed outright because she blushed so. They looked so happy and so absurdly proud of each other that I envied them. ‘What a life!’ I said to myself. ‘Beauty—talent—opportunity—wealth—and happiness!’ Oh, Emma, some people have it all in this world!”

“An’ some haves nothink,” responded Emma, with quiet bitterness.

“That is true. I could not help laughing at the difference a short sea-voyage made in Miss Le Breton. She is a wretched sailor, and when she landed she was half dead. It is great fun to see how ashamed most men look of their sea-sick womankind. They either stalk on in front or pretend they have lost something, and stay behind to look for it. And really a sea-sick person is a ghastly sight. I noticed that Mr. Le Quesne neither stalked on ahead nor lagged behind, but carried the poor girl up the steps, and was—oh, so kind to her!”

“They’re married now, you say, ma’am?”

“I think so. I have not seen it announced, but I daresay it has been, for all that.”

Annie rose from her knees, and went to the table for her cap. Mrs. Kemble rose from her seat on the bed.

“I’m awfully sorry the children have given you so much extra work,” she said lightly, as she ran downstairs.

Annie closed the door, then stood with her back against it, holding her swelling heart with both hands. Her breath was coming in gasps, and the pent-up tears would not come at all, although she tried to cry, feeling that unless she did she would burst into one of those storms of tearless sobs over which she had no control, and which, by alarming the inmates of the house, would betray her. She staggered to the washstand and tried to swallow some water, but it choked her, so she plunged hands and face into the filled basin, then walked frantically to and fro until she had in a measure regained her breath, using

it, when she did regain it, only to cry, as she had done years before :

"God help me, what shall I do?"

Her life seemed suddenly inverted. The very aim and purpose of it was gone, leaving behind it a desolate and abandoned creature, who had no foothold upon life anywhere. She had been so strong, so steadfast, so patient and content to wait God's time ; had looked forward, with a faith that nothing could shake, to the day which should reveal to her that man's identity, upon which she would be able to utter a name, knowing it for his. That day had come. She knew his name—only to know, too, the name of the woman who was to share it. The thought maddened her, and turned her into a fury. She suddenly burst out laughing as she thought how patiently, how reverently she had been following a phantom. Perish patience henceforth and for ever ! Perish reverence and meekness and unquestioning submission to a bitter yoke ! What were all these things to her, seeing that by the aid of none of them might she hope ever to come face to face with the father of her boy !

Also, this failure of one part of her scheme showed her how utterly she had wasted effort in another direction. For five long years she had striven upon her knees to root out of her heart its love for this man. She expected nothing from him, she would ask nothing. She knew she dared not reopen any guilty connection with him, for that would imperil her own soul and his. So she had believed that she had succeeded in separating from her thought of him all purely selfish interest, had conquered herself sufficiently to think of him only in connection with the child. Now even that link must be severed ; not even it could have any power to connect her with the husband of another woman.

The husband of another woman ! The very sting of it lay *re* ; for in all her thought of him she had not thought of *n* as *that*. By this she knew that, in spite of all her striving, she loved him selfishly still. Failure ! failure on every side ! she must give up the past and go upon a different plan.

As she paced her narrow room with increasing steadiness, Mrs. Imble's light word-sketches came back to her each in turn : "they looked so happy and so proud of each other" ; "He ght her in his arms and laughed" ; "He carried her up the ss, and was—oh, so kind to her !" Annie's breath steadied, elated, then came quietly and evenly as usual. Why uld they two be so happy ? Did his wife love him too dly to care what his past had been so that his future was



hers? *What* name was that? She tried to spell it over to herself—L-e-k-w-a-n-e. That was what her ignorance made of Mrs. Kemble's two swift syllables. Surely an odd name? One she had never seen or heard before. Well, now she knew it, and could trace him at any time. He being a man of note in the world, anyone could tell her where to find him. Why not find him now? Why not go to him and say, "Before you settle down to your married life, will you throw a thought backward to a girl who was only good enough for you to amuse yourself with, and not even good enough for that, *long*? I am that girl. I am not come to you for myself, being too low and common, with no chance of ever being higher or more desirable; but here is your son. What about him? Is he to be low and common too, or will you give him the same chance with the sons who may be born to you later on, who will not be one whit more yours than *he*? If you doubt that he is yours, take him, look at him, look at his eyes and then at your own. Ask any fair judge if there be any resemblance between you, and if that fair judge say "No," then I will take him away, and will trouble you no more."

She sat down, shaking in every limb.

She would do it. Wife or no wife, she would go to him. Why should she slave night and day to keep his son, when he was living in luxury, in sunny, married happiness with a lady, pampered like himself?

So he was kind to her, was he? Well, that was his way, and after all meant little. Time was when he had held the brambles back from hurting even her poor, ill-shod feet, when he had pushed aside the tough hazel-twigs that they might not rebound and sting her face. Once one had done so, and the tears coming into her eyes at the pain of it, he had laughed in his gentle way, and taking the face in his hands, had kissed it. Her face flamed now as she remembered that kiss.

"They shan't have it all," she burst out, in a fury. "I'll take Lin, and I'll go and find him. Lin's as much his as any son *she* will ever have. He won't deny it. He'll know it's naked truth. And she? She'll look at my boy, and she will know it too."

All the gentle influence of the religion to which she had clung passed away from her, leaving her a new creature. There was keen comfort in this strange desire for vengeance, in this murderous design upon his happiness; she felt exhilarated, buoyant. She answered the dining-room bell with more than her usual alacrity; she attended to the tea table with more

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than her usual animation, and actually smiled at Mrs. Kemble when she met that lady's attentive eyes.

"There's no sense in bein' meek," thought she; "*I've* had enough to forgive, an' now *she* shall have a little as well. He've got heaps o' money. Some of it shall go to keep my boy."

At half-past twelve she went up to bed, very tired, and with that strange exhilaration dying down. She commenced at once to undress. Her Bible lay on her table, but that could go for to-night. So could her prayers. Of what good were prayers? God helped those who helped themselves. She would henceforth pluck up heart and be selfish. Surfeited with self-denial and drudgery, she was going to begin afresh. She blew out her candle and got into bed.

But sleep would have none of her. The moonlight, streaming in through the uncurtained window, fell straight and steadily upon Sister Ruth's Lenten present to her, the framed print of a Thorn-crowned Head; the face of Sister Ruth herself, gentle and saint-like, came and stood by, looking very earnest; the face of a man she revered, second only to his Master, came close too, and his deep, never-to-be-forgotten voice spoke to her in no uncertain tone, telling her whither she was drifting.

"The devil is with you," it said. "Get up, open your book, and see what is there promised to those who have courage to stand firm to the end."

She got up and opened the book hap-hazard, then lit her candle, and removed her finger from the page.

"Delight thou in the Lord, and He shall give thee thy heart's desire.

"Commit thy way unto Him and trust in Him, and He shall bring it to pass."

She shut the book, and, kneeling down, prayed as usual. First of all for her boy, that he might be kept unspotted from the world; then for her people in the distant country village, that they might never know again such sorrow as she had brought upon them; then for the kind old folks who had given her shelter and honest payment for honest work; then for herself, that she might have courage to endure and not to question; and finally, for that man so far above her in a strange and sunny atmosphere, that he might be happy in the dear love of a better woman than she.

Against that last prayer the whole human nature of her rose up in fierce revolt. But with set teeth and clenched hands she

wrestled with it, and, wrestling, threw it behind her. She knelt there long after all power to pray, or even to think connectedly, had left her ; knelt on, worn out, inert, and exhausted, but she had won her blessing.

"I can't see how," she said, as she threw herself on her bed in the light of the rising sun, "but that's of no account. What I've borne for the last six years I can bear for the next. I'll hold on. I won't doubt, an' some day I'll see as God knowed better than me."

And before she slept there dawned upon her a conviction that it was indeed God, and not chance, who had been at work in her humble room that day. Was it chance that had sent her out on a trivial errand? Was it chance which had set Mrs. Kemble's mischievous children to turn out her box? Was it chance which had tossed that portrait upon the floor, and had put it into the hands of a woman who recognised it? Was it chance which had put *her* in possession of that man's name? No, of a surety there was something more than chance at work here !

Quite content again, and in charity with all the world, Annie fell asleep.

## CHAPTER XXI

### "MY CRIME'S THE WORST TO HUMAN VIEW"

THERE was enough to be done in Merryon Square just then. Mrs. Kemble and her children came nearly every day. Sometimes to a mid-day dinner, sometimes to a late one, sometimes to a high tea which was supposed to save trouble, but did not. Add to this the fact that Mrs. Holt was continually telling her niece to pack the children's little things in something handy, and to "bring them in the cab," because Emma "had a lot of spare time, and would do them up so well," and it will be seen that Emma was not idle. And when this sort of thing had gone on for the hottest six weeks in the year, she really began to grow weary.

Mr. Kemble had been called away to Liverpool, but had left his wife a free hand in the matter of engaging "auntie's treasure," if the treasure were willing.

"By the way, auntie, have you spoken to Emma?" said Mrs. Kemble, on the day of her husband's departure.

She and the children had spent it in Merryon Square, and were lingering over a latish dinner served in Emma's best style.

"Yes, yes, my love; of course. I spoke to her almost as soon as you spoke to me."

"Did she like the idea of going with us?"

"Yes, she seemed to welcome the thought of a change. No matter how kind one is to them, they always do *that*. And then, you see, she is a country-bred girl."

"I will speak to her myself presently."

"Certainly, love; when you like."

Mr. Holt endeavoured, without success, to catch his wife's eye. She moved her chair, and sat where he could not see her. He coughed and fidgeted, and trotted about, but the old lady sat unmoved, dumbly assuring her lord and master that his restlessness was understood and ignored. Annie was busy at her ironing board with Vy's elaborate frocks and pinafores when Mrs. Kemble descended to the kitchen, with

the skirt of her gown well up on her arm, and her eye on the alert for any stray article of a polluting character.

Servants usually liked Mrs. Kemble. She might be selfish, exacting, and given to the making of unnecessary work, but she was gracious even to familiarity, and pleasant selfishness on the part of a very pretty woman is more easily looked over by servants than the unbending *noli-ma-tangere*, different-order-of-being manner which so many mistresses think it correct to adopt.

Annie rested her iron and dusted a chair.

"Don't leave off, or I shall hinder you, because I have a good bit to say. Auntie told you how much I should like to take you with me?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"She says you are willing to come."

"I think I'd like it, ma'am. I haven't felt well lately, and Sister 'Lizabeth said last Sunday as she thought I'd better have a change."

Mrs. Kemble looked uneasy.

"Oh, I don't suppose it's much," she said; "these underground kitchens, probably. You will have plenty of air at home, and not so much to do. There is an awful lot to do here, I am sure, and aunt always was *faddy*."

This last in an undertone, accompanied by a confidential nod.

"Well, she likes everything done right, but as long as I knows how, I don't mind that. I've bin rather worryin', ma'am, about your cookin'. It isn't anythink in a plain way I'm afraid of, but about the fancy things an' sweets. Do you think I'll be able to manage them?"

"Oh! pray don't worry about the sweets," Mrs. Kemble said drily, "you can manage all the sweets *we* are likely to want. I have seen quite enough in the last few weeks to tell that you can undertake our cooking. If we ever go the length of a dinner-party, Mr. Kemble must hire help for the night; and for a supper, there is always a convenient pastry-cook."

Annie felt surprised, not so much at the words as the tone in which they were spoken.

"About the wages," Mrs. Kemble went on thoughtfully. "If you could undertake those fine things," with a nod in the direction of the ironing, "I could give you five-and-twenty pounds a year. I dare not offer you more; Mr. Kemble never had any idea of treating anyone fairly. If I get no justice, how can servants expect any?"

Not being educated up to the point of concealing her emotions, Annie stared at Mrs. Kemble in surprise. That lady laughed.

"Hasn't auntie told you all about us?" she said. "If *she* hasn't, the others will, as soon as you get there. The fact is, we may be grander at The Warren than you are in Merryon Square, Emma (oh, let me see, we shall call you 'Deane'), but we are no happier. You see," pulling herself up sharply, "Mr. Kemble is many, many years older than I, and in marriages of that sort there is always so much for the wife to put up with. I hope you will try to make things a little easier for me now. My cooks have given me such a lot of trouble."

"I'll do whatever I can, ma'am," said Annie heartily. "It won't be no trouble to work for you, I'm sure."

"Most of the *girls* are very good to me, leaving out the cooks, who are women, and always on the watch to feather their own nests; but when I do find a girl who considers me or waits upon me too much, Mr. Kemble is sure to mark her out for speedy dismissal, so you must be careful."

Annie was desperately sorry for the little lady.

"What a pity you ever married him, ma'am!" said she unguardedly.

"A thousand pities! I was a spoilt baby, Deane. Aunt ruined me. It was all done in kindness, but it was mistaken kindness. Now I am suffering for it. I thought a big house in a park was all any woman could want, besides a carriage and diamonds. I wore Mr. Kemble's mother's tiara and necklet every night for a week after we were settled at The Warren—then he took every bit of valuable jewellery to the bank, and has had an overdraught on it ever since! Oh! I ought not to talk about him to you; but if I don't tell you somebody else will."

"But you must ha' bin fond of him when you was married, ma'am?" said Annie timidly.

Mrs. Kemble laughed as she prepared to go upstairs.

"Not a bit of it, Deane," said she, with a dainty little grimace expressive of disgust; "all that sort of thing was on his side. I thought that was enough. Girls *are* such fools!"

When she had left the kitchen, her new servant paused in her work, trying to puzzle this matter out. Why should a lovely, happy girl, such as Mrs. Kemble must have been at eighteen, have married a man of fifty for whom it was scarcely possible she *could* care?

"I s'pose they must have persuaded her into it," thought

she, "like our folks tried to persuade me into marryin' Jim. I'm glad I never done that. I'm free, an' I'm not forced to live wi' somebody I don't like. To work ever so hard must be better than *that*. She never said nothing about Lin. As soon as I'm settled there I must find somebody as'll board him."

The children being fretful, Mrs. Kemble was anxious to get back to her hotel. In consequence of this, Annie was permitted to leave her kitchens in disorder, and to accompany her future mistress, that she might assist in putting the young rebels to bed.

She was unavoidably late in returning. She had her hot, untidy kitchens to clear up; it was long past supper-time, and Mrs. Holt was ruffled.

"So inconsiderate of Mrs. Kemble to keep you all that time," she said, "when you've so much to do. Really, you ought to have help, but it is too late to go for Mrs. Green to-night. You will have to be up *very* early in the morning."

When she carried down her supper-tray, Annie looked at the clock and then at the fireless grate.

"I ought to finish my ironin'," she said ruefully, "but it'd be so long 'fore the fire burnt clear. I'll do my silver for to-morrow. That'll be a help."

When she went to bed it was half-past one. She set her alarum clock at five, and rose by it, but work went hardly with her that day, and Mrs. Holt saw it.

"It is a good thing you are so orderly about your own things," she said. "I am sure they are all tidy, or you could never have been ready by the day after to-morrow. I feel I am making a great sacrifice—without proper notice or anything, too. I don't know how I *shall* manage. But I never did refuse dear Georgie anything, and—ah! now I think of it, are all Mr. Holt's shirts ready?"

"Yes, ma'am, I did them a Wednesday, 'stead of goin' out, you know."

"Ah! but the half-dozen 'reserve' shirts?"

"Oh, no, ma'am, not *them*," said Annie, in dismay.

"Well, as we are alone to-day, *do* try. Mr. Holt is *so* particular, and nobody can do up those shirts as you can. I wouldn't ask it when you are so busy, but he is *such* a worry."

Annie toiled upstairs after the reserve shirts, and about four in the afternoon was rolling them up into six nice, damp rolls, when up drove a cab, depositing Mrs. Kemble and the children.

"Only to tea," said the lovely little creature coaxingly,

"because you are so busy. And we will put up with bread and butter and auntie's nice jam; won't we, Walter?"

"No," said Walter flatly, "we don't want jam. You said we could have 'fiss' at auntie's, you *know* you did, zest 'cos we had eggs and rice puddin' for dinner."

Mrs. Kemble turned painfully red, and smartly slapped the child, at which he precipitated himself to the floor, where he had something which might well have been mistaken by the uninitiated for a fit. His mother put her hands to her ears, but took no further notice. When the fit had subsided and the child was intelligible, he continued to announce that he expected "fiss," that he meant to have "fiss," that if he might not have "fiss" he would have nothing, and he would make things uncomfortable as far as he was able. Unfortunately, his capacity for making things uncomfortable was surprisingly great. Mrs. Holt watched his mother's distress until she could bear it no longer. She wiped her perspiring forehead and went downstairs.

"Oh! how hot it is here!" she cried nervously, "but it is a good thing you have a clear fire. Those dear children had a make-shift dinner, nothing but eggs and a rice pudding. You know what children are, Emma—they want a bit of fish. Mrs. Kemble is so averse to troubling you, but what can she do, poor thing, when Mr. Kemble won't let them have what is really necessary? I suppose you must finish that shirt, or it will be too dry; but directly you have, just run and see if you can get a pair of good thick soles. If you have them filleted, they will be so little trouble."

Hot, jaded, and done up, Annie went in search of soles, found, brought them home, and fried them. When she took in the tea-tray the little old man might have been seen to look at her, and then to shake his fist at the children in a way which might have been playful, but which certainly looked vicious.

"You rascals!" he said, under his breath, "you double-dyed infantile atrocities! If only I had my way with you, I would—I would—ah! just *wouldn't* I!"

He dared not announce openly what it was that he would do, so he sat fidgeting on his chair, wondering if this were indeed one of those rare times which called for him to assert himself. Was it possible that he ought, he really *ought*, to pluck up the courage necessary for a battle with his wife.

The thought bathed him in a cold perspiration, but he grasped it right manfully, and sat and shivered in his shoes.



Tea was over, the children were in the garden, Mrs. Kemble lay back in auntie's chair; auntie sat rigidly upright, knitting a baby's sock.

Mr. Holt clutched the arms of his chair, preparing for a plunge. Unless he made it now, he felt there would be a stain upon his conscience for the rest of his life. He fidgeted violently and coughed.

"Is there anything the matter?" inquired Mrs. Holt nervously.

"There is, my love. There is something to be said which at present has not been said, and I wish the matter to be cleared up. Have you told Georgie the truth about Emma?"

Once into the fray, it was not so bad. The little man sat firm, waiting to be annihilated.

"Mr. Holt," said his little old lady, in tremulous tones of anger, "I have told Georgie all that is necessary."

"May I ask what you *have* told her; I must say, and I *will* say, that if she is satisfied, I am much surprised. She is the mistress of many servants, and has their prejudices to consider. I am speaking very reluctantly. I only want to know that nobody is being deceived—that everything is open and straightforward."

Mrs. Holt was for the moment speechless. Mrs. Kemble sat forward in her chair.

"What is the matter?" she said. "I am sure I don't want to fish up anything ugly in the girl's past, for of course if it were anything which could affect her now, auntie would have told me."

"Affect her now?" repeated the little old man, looking apoplectic, "and doesn't it? I should say that a big boy nearly six years old affects her pretty much in the eyes of most people."

Mrs. Kemble rose.

"A boy?" she said helplessly; "whose boy? I don't understand."

Mrs. Holt regained her self-possession.

"Sit down, my love," she said soothingly, "and let me explain. But, Mr. Holt, let me say first how surprised I am, how ashamed I am, of your unpardonable want of—of—modesty and good taste."

"I can't help that, my dear," he said sturdily. "It is as I thought—you have not told Georgie, and you ought to have done so."

"But, uncle, is it true? Has the girl a child of her own?"

"Certainly she has, a boy just turned five."

"Good gracious! When you spoke of her in that hesitating way, I thought there was something—some slip, or theft, or imprisonment, perhaps—all past and done with. But why was I not told right out? I ought to have been."

"Just what I said," said the little man; "just what I said."

"But indeed, love," interposed auntie piteously, "I did not really think you would close with her until last night. I made sure something would happen to prevent it, and I did not care to tell you before you had engaged her, because, you see, until *then* I had no right."

"She ought to have told me herself."

"I think perhaps she had not quite seen her opportunity, and—"

"And," said the little man firmly, "I have no doubt that she thinks you know. She would not intentionally hide it; I am sure of that."

"Oh," cried Mrs. Kemble, "of course, this puts an end to everything. I couldn't take her to The Warren on any account; why, I should set the whole house by the ears."

Upon the round face of the little old man there dawned an unholy joy.

"Just what I thought," he murmured resignedly; "exactly what I thought."

His wife, with one great sigh, sank into a state of humility.

"I suppose I was wrong," she said, "but I thought that, leaving in such a hurry, Emma would be safe in her new life before you found out about the child, and then I felt sure you would overlook it. I have acted all for the best, and in the true spirit of unselfishness. I thought I was securing you a servant who would be a treasure to you, and I knew that the increase of salary would mean so much to the girl. Also, with the boy at a safe distance, nobody need have been the wiser. In fact, I have always said that Emma would do better to keep the boy in the background."

"Which she won't do, you know," explained the frustrator of Mrs. Holt's plans; "she can't be prevailed upon to hide the boy at all. She doesn't think it honest."

"But," said Mrs. Holt, "since Mr. Holt has chosen, for some *extraordinary* motive of his own, to come forward and interfere with my plans for you and Emma, I can only apologise, and wish I had let other people manage their own affairs. I am sure I wonder at anyone trying to do a good turn in this world—it is a most ungrateful task!"

Mrs. Kemble looked impatient and irritable.

"Well," she said bluntly, "it is awfully tiresome. There is the possibility of inducing the girl to say nothing about the child. If she can keep her own counsel, I am sure I should not publish her private affairs. Mr. Kemble would know nothing about it, and everything would be satisfactory."

"Exactly!" said auntie, beginning to beam again. "Let it rest, love, and let things take their course. Say nothing now, and when you get Emma safely away, simply *forbid* her mentioning the child. Tell her if she does, she will be instantly dismissed. She is very amenable to discipline; she will not rebel. Once in Essex, she will see the difficulty of getting away, and you will be able to manage her easily."

"Oh, nonsense!" said Mrs. Kemble. "I couldn't take her with me unless we came to a definite understanding first."

"Then, my love, it will end in your loss. Get her away, and you can make your own terms."

Mrs. Kemble angrily shook her head, picked up her dainty skirts, and left the room.

When she had gone, the old gentleman sat and trembled. He had won a moral victory, but it had left him weak. His little lady sat and trembled too, so violently that the tiny silver oats in her best cap played a tiny tinkling tune, but never one word she said. She looked, however, a great deal; she looked so much that Mr. Holt became nervous, and finding the situation too strong for him, trotted out to the garden and took refuge with the children.

When Mrs. Kemble entered the kitchen, Annie was on the floor in the midst of the scattered contents of her housemaid's box.

"It's very dirty an' dusty here just now, ma'am," she said wearily. "I'm cleanin' up, an' shan't be long if you wants me."

"I do want you. How I hate a kitchen after a meal with any suspicion of cooking in it! And oh, how the fish smells! Really, kitchens ought to be right away from where one *lives*."

Annie tried to smile, and putting one hand to her forehead, left a smear of blacklead across it, which did not improve her appearance.

"I have just heard something," Mrs. Kemble said irritably, "and unless you and I can come to some understanding about it, our compact must fall through. I had no idea that you had a son."

Annie scrambled to her feet, and leaned against the dresser, while the hot kitchen seemed to revolve.

"It wasn't my fault you didn't know, ma'am. I ast the missus if she'd told you, an' as near as I can remember, she said, 'Oh, of course.' Yes, I am sure that's what she said."

"That is about what she would say," said Mrs. Kemble rudely, "but she has acted foolishly, and I feel rather annoyed. If I had had a notion of—of—this, I should not have engaged you."

Annie put her hand to her head again, and waited until its throbbing had subsided.

"There's an end of it, then, ma'am," said she quietly, "an' I can only say agen, it isn't my fault."

After which she expected Mrs. Kemble to depart, but finding her expectation vain, said:

"Shall we let it be at that, ma'am? I can't go with you, so will you be kind enough to let me finish here? I've had some hard days an' some long days lately, an' next to no rest. I'm pretty well done."

She wondered at her impertinence in thus addressing a lady, but she *was* "pretty well done," and at the end of caring about anything or anybody, even herself.

"Oh, that's not it at all," said Mrs. Kemble, much surprised. "It is all very well to say the matter ends here, but what about *me*? What about the inconvenience to which *I* shall be put? Just think how foolish I shall look if I have to explain to my husband that I engaged you without a single reference—simply on my aunt's word. It was such a ridiculous thing to do. I cannot imagine how I came to do it. Mr. Kemble will say that anyone can hoodwink *me*."

"I'm very sorry, ma'am, an' that's all I can say."

"That is of no use. The thing is, what shall we do? What was your idea about the child?"

"How do you mean, ma'am?"

"I mean, had you any notion of taking him with you?"

"Yes, ma'am. I thought I'd find somebody there as would board him, an' when I had, I'd send for him."

"Impossible—quite impossible!"

"Very well, ma'am."

"Of course, he is off your hands? I mean—does he cost you anything?"

"I've paid for him now more than a year. He's at St. Saviour's Schools."

"Well, then, leave him there. At least, he is better cared for than he would be outside. To take him away would be ridiculous."

"Then I shouldn't go away myself, ma'am. I wouldn't go nowhere that I couldn't see him once a week. That's my holiday—Wednesdays—an' Lin's, too; an' it's all the pleasure we've got to look forward to."

"But you forget that you have engaged to go with me. You are my servant, and I cannot let your scruples about leaving your boy behind interfere with my arrangements. I shall hold you to our compact. That is a settled thing; it is not to be upset. I am only here to say that as long as you remain with me nobody must know anything of this stain upon your character. Surely if I consent to overlook it, you ought to be thankful to hold your tongue! None of the people at The Warren must get a hint. I should be servantless at the end of a month. So don't be tempted to confide in *anyone*; send your boy's money when you are out alone; and be sure never to leave your letters about. That is all you have to remember, and it is all I have to say."

"Don't go yet, please, ma'am," said Annie, "because that doesn't end it. You can't *hold* me to any engagement. There's nothing *bindin'* bin done. It's not my fault you've bin put to this trouble, so now I must ast you to let me alone, for I'm that bad to-night, how to do what I've got to do, I don't know."

"But you will be better after a night's rest. I shall not leave London until the afternoon."

"Thank you, ma'am, I'm not goin'."

"But I shall *expect* you to go," said Mrs. Kemble excitedly, "and I am quite sure aunt will expect it too. Good gracious, girl, are situations in gentlemen's families so plentiful that you, with your history, can afford to refuse one? Come, now, think it over. Say you leave here, where do you think you would be received if you persisted in telling people what they need not know? Into no *good* service, that is certain."

"I've stuck to my boy for five years, ma'am. I've never denied him, nor yet tried to pass myself off for something as I'm not, an' I shan't begin now."

"But you will have to."

"No, ma'am—I don't think so. When I left the Home, Mrs. Holt wanted me to hide the child, an' I was p'raps a bit tempted to; but then I made up my mind and said 'No,' an' stuck to it, an' Sister Ruth, the best one o' them all, come to

me when she heard o' what I said, an' she says, 'You're quite right; you've got to begin afresh, and you'll do it better with the child in your arms; it will be a comfort to you. You had the wrong sort of courage to face the sin; now you must have the right sort to face the consequences. Never deceive anybody. Tell the truth on every occasion, when you see it necessary for a right understanding between you and somebody else. That does not mean that you need cry it on the house-tops. It may be years before you win back people's respect; but you will win it; and the child who looks to you and speaks to you openly as "mother" will be your help.' I never forgot what she said, an' I know I find out how true it was."

"Sentimental rubbish! How can the child help you? Will he, when he grows up, repay you for your extra-conscientious publication of *his* private misfortune along with your own? Not he! Believe me, he would far rather you left people to believe that he was respectable. Will he repay you for standing in your own light to announce to everyone that he had only one parent instead of the regulation two? Not he! He will, in all probability, be thoroughly ashamed of you, and that is all. I know that sounds brutal, but it is common sense, and a little common sense is worth a great deal of mawkish sentiment."

"I can't understand what you're sayin', ma'am," said Annie patiently; "but one thing I can see is, that you an' me would never think alike."

"That is—fortunate," said Mrs. Kemble, a trifle insulted. "I am *very* glad that we two are not asked to view life from the same standpoint. But what about this child? Shall I take you into my service as *Mrs.* Deane, a widow? Then the child would seem all right enough. There! surely that will meet the case. I wonder you have not done that before."

Annie shook her head.

"It would not be the truth, ma'am, an' I can't take on the worry of a lie now. If I goes to your place, I do my work, an' I harm nobody. What's gone before in my life is no business o' nobody's."

"Yes, yes; but can't you see that a thing like this is just the business that is everybody's. It is the one crime for which a woman never gets forgiven—the one thing against her which is never permitted to be forgotten. And really, I only say what I think when I say that it serves her right; for to throw away all one has—one's very life, indeed—for love of a brutal,

selfish *man* is, before everything, idiotic. It is the very stupidest thing conceivable."

Mrs. Kemble turned contemptuously on her little Wurtemberg heel. Everyone knew that she had a fiery temper, and a long series of pitched battles-matrimonial had made her coarse of speech.

"And yet, ma'am, to my mind, you yourself done somethink quite as bad, *if 'twasn't worse.*"

A pause. Mrs. Kemble turned again on her heel, and stood transfixed with astonishment. Annie, white as a sheet with the pain of her head and the effort necessary to conquer her natural submission to her superiors, leaned heavily against the dresser, and bit her lips to keep them from twitching.

"I beg your pardon," said Mrs. Kemble at last, "but *what* was that you said? Surely I misunderstood you?"

"I said, ma'am, that to my mind you'd done somethink quite as bad, if not worse; an' I say now that I'd rather be like *I* am than I'd be like *you* are."

"In the name of everything that is ridiculous, what do you mean?"

"What I've said, ma'am. You haven't spared me, nor took any thought o' whether I'd any feelin' or none, so I'm saying just what I thinks to be right. I don't want to make any excuses for what I've done. Nobody could see plainer than I can the sin o' the thing, though I didn't properly see it at the time, for I wus but a bit o' a baby, a few months past sixteen. I was jest as ignorant o' what things is as your little children out there at play."

She stopped and controlled her shaky voice. Mrs. Kemble's curiosity was aroused. What was the girl going to tell her?

"I never had no pleasures—not what *you'd* call pleasures, ma'am—nor nobody to think I wanted any, for I wus on'y one out of a lot, an' we wus very poor. I've heard you talk about bein' poor, ma'am, but I means that sort o' poorness what don't give you enough to eat, an' keeps the children a-bed while you washes out their clothes for Sundays. I've worked hard enough since I've bin here, an' lately I've done more than one pair o' hands can do for long together; but ever since I was a child I can remember nothing but hard work, with nursin' a heavy baby for a kind o' rest. When I goes to bed now I often think o' my bed on the floor at home. It was the best as mother could give me, but there wusn't much comfort in it, ma'am, for a girl that worked from five in the mornin' to seven at night, an' offen later than that. Mother wus such a

slave herself that I don't s'pose she'd got time to think it wus hard on me, but it wus. A girl what's young don't always want to be a slave, even if 'tis to her own brothers an' sisters. Then in the middle o' all that there come along that man. He wus nothink like any man I'd ever had to do with; he was the sort o' man as even *you*, ma'am, might be proud to think as he took notice of you. He took a lot o' notice o' me, an' wus that kind to me an' friendly-like in his ways that I sort of got deaf an' blind to everythink but him."

Mrs. Kemble, becoming interested, perched herself on the edge of the kitchen table.

"Did your parents know anything about it?"

"No, ma'am; I met him on the sly."

"You were quite old enough to know *that* was wrong."

"Quite old enough, ma'am. I'm not trying to excuse myself at all. I'm on'y tryin' to show you what sort o' life I'd had, an' what a wonderful thing it wus to me to be made a fuss of by somebody like him. I got right out o' myself. I had no more thought o' *myself* than if I'd bin a stock or a stone. I wus what you'd call a fool, but—if my right hand could ha' done him any good, I'd ha' gone for the rest o' my life without one. Mind, ma'am, that man never promised me nothink at all; I jest throwed myself away for the pleasure o' bein' with him, o' bein' somethink to do with him, bad as it wus."

"It *was* bad," said Mrs. Kemble, filling in the pause, "and as I said—very foolish."

"Well, ma'am, that wus *me*, an' now here am I, a ruined woman; an' as you says, it serves me right. But when you've said that, ma'am, I can't help thinkin' o' *you*. You wus older than me, an' had, as far as I can see, everythink as heart could wish for—edjucation to learn you what *wus* right, plenty o' love an' kindness, an' all! There come along to you a man what wus old enough to be your father, an', if I judge right, older than that, an' you throwed yourself away jest as sure as ever I did, not for the sake o' him, but for the sake o' what he'd got. You've told me that yourself. Wusn't you old enough to know *that* wus wrong? I think so. You're glad to say that us two isn't ast to look at things from the same point o' view, and, ma'am, *so am I*, for I do say that I could sooner forgive a girl who sold herself for love than one what sold herself for money. It means the same ruin to both of 'em, when you looks at it right; but at least the one what sells herself for love don't go to church an' call God to witness a wicked lie. I'm an unhappy woman, ma'am, an' *you* are the one to say it serves me right.



I mustn't say that to you, because it's not my place, but I can *think* what I like, ma'am, can't I?"

Having said which, Annie stumbled forward and fell in a heap upon the floor.

Mental excitement had put the finishing touch to physical exhaustion, had laid the last straw on the back of the proverbial camel, and the result was collapse.

Almost as white as the girl, Mrs. Kemble felt her way out of the kitchen and up the dark stairs. Then she burst open the dining-room door.

"I know," she gasped out, "I know that absence makes a vast difference to people's affection for one; but I never, never thought that you would have permitted me to be insulted in this house by an ignorant, impertinent servant girl!"

And, oh, what a fillaloo there was that night in Merryon Square!

## CHAPTER XXII

### "THE BEST VOICE OF THE LOT"

ANNIE came back to herself later on amid the scattered contents of her housemaid's box, with a feeling of close proximity to something loathsome. This proved to be an immense horror of the beetle tribe, promenading leisurely upon her bare arm. She hurled the thing away, then pulled herself up by a friendly chair, sat down on it, leaned her head against the wall, and gave herself up to lethargy. She heard the patter of the children's feet in the hall, and the banging of the front door, connecting these sounds with the departure of Mrs. Kemble.

Long after dark some one came into the kitchen, struck a light, and stood looking at her. With some effort she opened her eyes and saw Mrs. Green, the woman who occasionally came in to help. That lady lit the gas, turned up the skirt of her gown, and fastened it behind her with the big cameo brooch she had taken out of her shawl.

"Oh, dear," said Annie stupidly, "is it Saturday? You needn't have come. I'm not goin' now."

The woman nodded indulgently.

"Where's your friends?" she said, speaking with raised voice, as if the girl were deaf.

Annie could not trouble to explain.

"Because you've done enough for a bit, and if you've got nobody else, then I'll take you home for a rest. P'raps now you'll see that I was right when I said you was a fool ever to do what you have done here. It's bin' all right enough from Mrs. Holt's way o' lookin' at things, but slave-drivin' is done away with now. 'How can there be a lot o' work in a house where there are only two people?' says she to me just now. 'Right enough, ma'am,' say I, 'but I've seen people have rooms turned out for the sake of seein' other people at work, an' I *have* knowed missises as would rather have furniture an' carpets wore out with on-necessary cleanin', than give a servant an

hour or two's rest.' Come on, now, out o' this, an get to bed."

Mrs. Green lifted Annie out of her chair, half-carried her upstairs, and saw her into bed. With one great sigh of thankfulness, the girl was asleep.

When she awoke the next morning, Mrs. Green and Sister Ruth were standing beside her bed. Said the latter :

"Mrs. Green came to us last night and told us you were ill. I have come to see if it is possible to take you back with me for a rest."

Annie feebly protested that she had had a rest, that she was very grateful, but would stay and do her work. At which Mrs. Green said "Rubbish !" and Sister Ruth said "Impossible !" the result being that Sister Ruth and Annie departed from Merryon Square in a cab.

The girl thought it a trifle unkind of Mrs. Holt to let her go without seeing her, but when she remembered the old lady's passionate affection for her niece, she concluded that she (Annie) had given mortal offence by daring to speak her mind to that exalted lady.

"She'll never forgive me," the girl said later on to Sister Elizabeth, "an' I don't know however I come to speak so to a lady, but I couldn't seem to help myself."

Sister Elizabeth was very gentle.

"Never mind Mrs. Holt," she said ; "you have proved to us that you desire to do what is right. We can find you a place when you are ready to take one. Five years' character will take you anywhere."

All the Sisters' prejudice against Annie had long since given place to respect for her straightforwardness, her integrity, and her self-denying devotion to her boy. They knew no more of her than they had done at first, but even her reticence gave her an additional claim upon their respect, seeing that reticence among women who have made "the" mistake is a quality extremely rare. So it happened that Annie's second stay at the Home was a pleasant one, affording her just the restful change she needed. At the end of a fortnight she washed herself again, and asked for permission to return to work.

"I'm not earnin' anythink," she said, "an' the boy's got to be paid for. Please may I send for my things from the Square?"

The messenger who went for the "things" returned without them, and the same day a lady, who looked very sheepish, and who could not meet Sister Elizabeth's eyes, called at the Home

to know what Emma meant by sending for her things. Of course, she was coming back. Had not everyone understood it? Dear, dear, how very distressing and extraordinary! Oh, please let her see Emma herself? Emma would say at once that it had been an understood thing.

Sister Elizabeth was quiet, but decided.

"I cannot advise the girl to return to you, Mrs. Holt," she said. "She was brought here a fortnight ago completely prostrated by hard work and long hours. You have had a willing and a conscientious servant. You have taken advantage of her misfortune to deny her those privileges of freedom and leisure which are the common right of all, and which the ordinary girl would have taken to herself. To such an ordinary girl I believe you would be an excellent mistress; to the girl who has not the courage to defend herself, I fear you are very hard."

The little old lady was indignant, was outraged, was scandalised! Was not Merryon Square a home? Was it not a Christian home? Were not the duties light? Was not she herself the most lenient, the most ridiculously easy-going mistress alive? And if she were ever anything else, was it anybody's fault but that of her husband, who was so firm in the matter of governing servants? And so very particular!

As to that night on which she was accused of something like brutality to a sick girl—did she even know she was sick? Had anyone told her? Had the girl herself complained? How could one be expected to know a girl was ill if she never said anything about it? And how could she—Mrs. Holt—know that Emma lay on the kitchen floor in a faint for nearly two hours, when she had enough to do to attend to her dear niece, Mrs. Kemble, who was so pardonably upset, and who was, always had been, and always *must* be, such a perfect lady?

Sister Elizabeth sat unmoved, but presently said she would speak to the girl. She did so.

"The Holts want you back. I am not advising you to go; but if you *do* go, I have made the terms upon which you will do so."

"I means to go, ma'am," said Annie at once, "an' I'll tell you why. I was silly to go on doin' what I did, grumblin' to myself, but not speakin' out. I did think she ought to have knowed I wus doin' too much; but when I found she didn't know, I ought to have spoke, an' there'd bin an end to it. I shall know better now. There's always somethink to be put

up with in every place, an' these people knows all about me. I'll go back, thank you, ma'am."

She went back, much to the delight of the old gentleman, who, however, had the discretion to conceal such delight under a mask of stolid indifference.

Of all the privileges which her return to Merryon Square brought her, Annie valued one the most highly; she was permitted to have her boy with her from the Saturday afternoons to the Sunday evenings. Those Saturday afternoons became the very joy of her existence. To meet the 'bus which brought the child, to take his little warm hand in hers, and wander with him through one of the parks, to hear his happy chatter, to watch his happy face with its odd, fleeting flashes of likeness to a face she had known in the time that was no more, to take him home and sit him up in the kitchen while she finished her work, to feed him somewhat injudiciously with the dainty bits of her own fare carefully stored for him in a biscuit tin, to fall asleep at night with his head on her arm, to wake before he did and lie and watch him, to put on his clean collar and take him into the dining-room to say "Good morning" to the old people—all these simple things made her content to work hard for the rest of the week, and shed upon her selfless life all the sunshine that it had.

Gradually, by imperceptible growth of custom, Lin grew to regard the dining-room with less of awe and more of criticism; grew to look upon one particular chair as his, and to think it no great privilege to have his tea with the old people.

Annie would try to keep him downstairs, fearing to be thought presumptuous, but the child was a happy, unobtrusive little creature, and if he did not trot upstairs, the old gentleman was sure to ring for him. Occasionally, it is true, the old lady lectured upon the inadvisability of lifting the boy out of his proper sphere; but her lecture fell upon stony ground, and Lin regarded the dining-room as a fair field, to which he was admitted without favour.

This state of things kept Annie in perpetual apprehension. She knew that as the boy grew to look upon his privileges as a right, Mrs. Holt would resent it, and would make herself uncomfortable and unpleasant.

This apprehension was not justified until Lin was getting on towards his ninth birthday. He came from school in the 'bus as usual, and running up the square, sprang up the steps, and finding the dining-room door ajar, went right in. Now it happened that Mrs. Holt had a visitor, and that Lin forgot to

wipe his boots. The boy stood with his cap in hand for a few seconds, checked by the colour of Mrs. Holt's face and the expression of her closed mouth, then he said awkwardly :

"Shall I go downstairs, ma'am?"

"Certainly," responded she with asperity; "and another time, please remember to come in by the area-gate. Tell Emma to bring a dustpan and brush here at once. Your boots are muddy."

Lin flushed scarlet and went downstairs.

"I didn't know there was anyone there," he said to his mother, "and Mrs. Holt was cross."

Annie departed with the dustpan and brush. As she reached the dining-room she heard Mrs. Holt say something about "old servants," and the difficulty there was in checking their tendency to presumption.

"I've bin expectin' this, dear," she said to Lin, when she went down again, "an' you shouldn't ha' gone into the dinin' room like that. I'm not sorry, because it's time as you knew that you're not parlour comp'ny, an' mustn't expect to go there onless you're sent for."

"I don't mind about going there," said Lin, with his eyes brimming over, "but they've always told me to go; and why should they tell me if they don't want me? Mr. Holt wasn't there. She wouldn't have spoken to me like that if he had been."

Mr. Holt came in shortly after, and rang the bell.

"Tea, please, Emma," said the old lady; and, "Where's the boy, Emma?" said the old gentleman.

"Down with me, sir."

"Send him up, send him up; and where's that division sum? My word, what I'll say to him if he hasn't done that division sum."

Annie went down and told Lin to go up. But he was still smarting, and said he didn't "want to go up, thank you."

"Nonsense, dear, you mustn't show temper. We are not supposed to do that, Lin; it isn't our place. I've had to pocket a deal like that, Lin, an' so must you. Go up, my boy, please."

Lin was obedient, and went, but did not sit down, and when asked to do so, said:

"If you please, sir, I'll have tea with mother."

"Eh, why, what's this?" cried Mr. Holt, "why—why—why—I can't understand. Have tea with your mother when there

are muffins about? Hot muffins with plenty of butter? Why, what's the matter?"

"Nothing, sir," said Lin, turning red; "but mother's all alone, and I think I ought to go and keep her company."

"Quite right," said the old lady hastily, "and it is very good of him. Emma can keep one muffin back for him. Don't interfere with him, Mr. Holt; it is only right that he should prefer to go down with Emma."

"But it's funny, all the same, my love, because he usually prefers to stay with us. Well, well, you rascal, run along, then, and come up when you have had your tea. I must have it out with you about the division sum."

When Lin had left the room, Mrs. Holt began.

"You really must stop making this fuss about that boy. I have been watching for an opportunity to speak, and now I have found it. You have lifted the boy out of his place, and presently we shall find it difficult to make him understand what that place really is. In fact, I had occasion to give him a lesson to-day."

The old gentleman was like Lin, he did not understand; he showed it.

"The boy is growing up. When he was a baby, it was all very well, but now it is getting tiresome, and it is time he understood that for him to be here is a favour; but that for him to come rushing in as if the place belonged to him is a liberty, and a liberty," finished the little lady firmly, "which must be checked."

"But, my love, what's the matter with the boy? Why, we have known him from a baby, and he is such a nice, well-mannered little chap. I thought you liked to have him here; upon my word, I thought you did."

"That does not say that I want him rushing in here whether I am alone or not, whether he is welcome or not. If we do want him we can always ring."

"But I have never known him 'rush in.'"

"He rushed in to-day, in at the front door, and, without knocking or anything, came right across this carpet with his boots all mud. Mrs. Sherman—Mrs. John Sherman—happened to be here, and she asked me if the boy were a visitor of mine."

"Well, he was, my love, wasn't he?" laughed Mr. Holt nervously.

"Don't be foolish, Mr. Holt. Of course, I had to explain things, and Mrs. Sherman was so sarcastic! You know what

she *can* be. 'Such a novel idea,' she said, 'to have the children of one's unmarried servants invading one's reception rooms.' Of course, it was unpleasant, but I must say that she pointed something out to me which I had not thought of before. 'Depend upon it,' she said, 'the woman is bringing up that boy with false ideas, and all on account of you allowing him the run of the house. She has her eyes open. She thinks if you live long enough you will do something in the matter of placing him out, or, if you don't, that you will leave him something in your will. That's *her* move!' You know Mrs. Sherman was always rather vulgar."

"*Very* vulgar," said Mr. Holt angrily, "much *too* vulgar, my dear, for her opinions to have any value."

"But there was sense in what she said. If we *are* raising any hopes of that sort in Emma's mind, it is our duty to crush them at once. That boy is nothing whatever to us, and I should not dream of doing anything for him. How could we when we have Georgie?"

"Well, I don't know," said the little man slowly. "I am without kith or kin, and your niece, my dear, has no claim upon me. I think I have said that if Emma remains with us I shall not forget her good services. You may remember, Mrs. Holt, that I have said that."

Mrs. Holt dropped her knitting and turned faint. It is true that she did in a general way rule her husband, who, by the way, was her junior by five years; but she had never been able to guide his hand in the framing of certain directions concerning the final distribution of his property, neither had she seen those directions. Mr. Holt had them in safe custody, and when approached on the subject was exasperatingly uncommunicative. This worried his wife to the verge of despair, and still the little man, though he knew it, made no sign. It was the last vestige of authority that remained to him, and he held on to it firmly.

"Of course, I have heard you say something of the kind," Mrs. Holt said, in great agitation, "but I am certain you would not dream of leaving Emma *much*. She is well paid—I think over-paid, and yet sometimes I fear that if anything happened to me you would be cajoled into doing something unjust."

"Unjust, my love? How could it be that, when we have no children of our own?"

"It could, it could, and you know how. We have brought Georgie up, and you know my wishes, my intentions with



regard to her. If you ignore these, Mr. Holt, it will prove very plainly that you care nothing about *me*."

"I care very much about you, but Georgie is a different matter. We took her from a poor home, and lavished upon her both money and affection. Perhaps you have had some return for it, my dear; but *I* have had none—none whatever. Miss Georgie made her bed in her own wilful way, and I think she finds it uncomfortably hard. A matrimonial bed usually is when it is made without affection. She will have your money, and she will have *some* of mine, but not all. If you have encouraged her to look forward to my death you have done wrong. So you were a bit sharp with the boy to-day?"

"I *was* sharp; and let me say at once, Mr. Holt, that I will not have that boy encouraged to take liberties in this house. No, not if I have to tell Emma that in future he had better spend his Sundays at school."

"I object to that," commenced the old gentleman firmly; but he said no more, for Annie entered with the tray. Her face was flushed, and her lips indrawn. Mrs. Holt saw directly that the girl had overheard part of the conversation between Mr. Holt and herself. The old lady's heart sank. Oh, dear! oh, dear! Now Emma would go, and all her troubles would begin afresh.

But Emma was not so upstart, and knew her "place" far too well to resent Lin's snub. She let the matter pass without comment, until she and the boy were waiting for the 'bus which was to take him back to school. Then she said:

"I think, dear, that p'raps it'll be as well if you don't look to come now ev'ry Saturday. Will you be disappointed?"

"It'll be a bit dull at school," said Lin, in his old-fashioned way, "but I shan't mind when I think of what Mrs. Holt said to me. I don't feel as if I want to come next Saturday, but the old gentleman said I was to."

"Then you'd better. On'y, dear, I'll be glad if you'll bear in mind that I'm on'y a servant here, an' that you're my little boy. Mr. and Mrs. Holt is my master an' mistress, an' we're nothink to them at all. I've bin goin' to tell you that, becous' I knew she'd soon begin to think it wus time to tell you that you wus makin' too free."

"I remember she did tell me a little while ago that I must make the most of things," said Lin; "and when I asked her why, she said that as I got older I shouldn't be able to come so much. The old gentleman laughed and patted me on the

back. I always liked him," finished Lin candidly, "much better than her."

"Well, we must break off your comin' a little at a time. There's a lot o' disappointments for poor people like us, Lin; but they're all for our good, an' they don't hurt much as long as we try to do our best. Here's your 'bus. Mind what I says, be a good boy, an' learn all you can while you've got the chance."

Lin kissed her and sprang into the 'bus, nodding at the patient figure on the kerb-stone until he could see it no longer.

All that week was Mrs. Holt specially gracious, even fussy, and she mentioned Lin more than once in quite a motherly way. But Annie was more than usually quiet, and the thought of the coming Saturday was sad, instead of pleasant. On the Friday evening, however, she had a surprise, in the shape of a letter from the boy.

"MY DEAR MOTHER,—I am writing to tell you something I am sure you will be glad to hear. Mr. Hoskins, our choir-master, has asked if I can stay here for Sundays. You know we have got a little chapel in the house, because you have seen it. Three of the boys that used to sing in the choir have gone to Canada (if it was not for you I *should* like to go, too) and some of the others' voices are breaking. Your voice does break when you are old enough. So Mr. Hoskins tried a lot of us to see if we could sing; then he picked out me and two or three more, and tried us again. He says I have got the best voice of the lot, and he's going to teach me. So I said I would stop Sundays if you didnt mind. This will come in nicely about Mrs. Holt, won't it? I shall not be at all dull now, because I just do like singing, and I can go up ever so high, like that boy that sings in the anthem at St. Saviour's. So good-bye for this week. Come down to church some Sundays. Our friends are allowed to come.

"I remain, your *very* loving son,

LIN.

"I know I have spelt this quite right, because I have wrote it with a dictionary, all except didnt, and that I could not find. I am glad about the old lady. Won't she be surprised. I am sorry about the old gentleman, though, because I think now I don't come he will be rather dull."

Annie smiled as she folded the letter.

"God's way out of my little trouble," said she. "I can work with a light heart now."

But the touch of human nature in her caused her to keep silence until the boy was asked for.

Saturday's tea-time came, and Mr. Holt rang the bell.

"Where's the boy, Emma?" as the tray appeared.

"Not comin' to-day, sir, thank you," said Annie briskly.

"What? What's the matter?"

"Nothink, sir. They wants him to stay Sundays now, to sing in the choir, so o' course I must be glad as he's o' some use. It's bin very kind o' you, sir, an' you, too, ma'am, to have him here so often; I'm very much obliged to you both."

Mrs. Holt turned slowly red, and her little silver oats rattled.

"You are very welcome, Emma," she said stiffly. The old man said nothing.

But when tea was over, the old lady was so full of indignation that she trotted off to the kitchen to speak her mind. If she chose to regulate the boy's visits, well and good; for Emma to do so was "upstart."

"I don't understand this, Emma," she said, "I mean the boy's sudden stopping at school. I feel sure there is something behind, some unbecoming spirit of resentment. It is true that I was annoyed with him for rushing into the dining-room in that rude way when I was receiving a visitor. I spoke firmly to him, but it was for his good, and if you could not see that I think you are very silly. You will find it a mistake to encourage the boy in being upstart. That will neither become your position nor give him the true idea of his."

"I'm not doin' that, ma'am. I've had no hand at all in his stoppin' at school. But now, as it's settled he is to stop, I'm glad, because I think he might have got to look on comin' here as a right, an' I couldn't have helped myself. I've tried that hard to keep him in his place, you can't think; but you wus so kind to him, an' childern don't see the rights o' things. You can't expect it."

"Well, it seems strange that he should be wanted so suddenly, and that you should say nothing about it."

"I didn't know myself, ma'am, 'till last night. But I'm glad it's happened. I've bin tryin' to think how to tell the boy, becos' I knowed you'd soon think 'twas time. Now it's settled all outside of us."

"Well, now, *really*," said Mrs. Holt, "I *must* say I think you have some odd notions of privileges. For all our really

remarkable kindness to your boy, what do we get? Gratitude? Not a bit of it! Simply resentment when we think him old enough to be taught that he has no real claim upon our consideration. What has been really a great favour you have distorted into something like a right. Well, well, that is the sort of thing I have experienced all my life!"

"I'm not ungrateful, ma'am," said Annie, "far from that."

"But *do* you suppose that child would have had the run of any house but this? Of course not. It has been a great concession on our part. It is true that I might still be inclined to let things stay over a bit, but Mr. Holt has noticed the tendency to take things as a matter of course, and I have told you how very sharp he is upon anyone who takes a liberty. You may not believe me, but he is—*very* sharp."

"I'm quite satisfied, ma'am," said Annie quietly, "an' very grateful for all the happy Sundays you've give me an' the boy."

The old lady rambled on anent "privileges," and finally went upstairs, still gently insinuating that but for Mr. Holt's intense dislike of anyone taking liberties, Lin might have spent his Sundays in Merryon Square for ever. But the next morning, when Mrs. Holt was dressing for church, her husband crept cautiously down to the kitchen.

"Emma," cried he, in a flurried whisper, "Emma, I must tell you how sorry I am that Mrs. Holt upset the boy. I happened to be out, or it would not have happened. It was done more to please that old hag of a Sherman woman than anything. She's a female terror, Emma, a—a—horse-marine woman—dreadful! I am tremendously sorry! Don't mention to Mrs. Holt that I said anything, but I shan't lose sight of the boy, Emma. He's a jolly young shaver, and I'm very fond of him."

Whereupon the little old man crept upstairs, and arriving in the hall, had a sham fit of coughing to let Mrs. Holt know his whereabouts.

So Lin ceased to spend his "week-ends" in Merryon Square, and thus was established a new state of affairs which lasted for more than two years.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### LIN STARTS LIFE ON HIS OWN ACCOUNT

ONE afternoon in late autumn Annie was summoned from the consideration of Mr. Holt's new shirts by the sharp ringing of the front door bell. She ran upstairs and opened the door to Mr. Netherwood.

"Please come in, sir. Mrs. Holt is in," said she.

"I will see Mrs. Holt, certainly," he said, smiling at Annie's brilliant colour, "but I came on purpose to see *you*."

Annie ushered him in, and then resumed her work until the drawing-room bell re-summoned her.

Mr. Netherwood had not disclosed his reason for wishing to see Annie, and Mrs. Holt was very anxious; but of course she withdrew, and—left the door open.

Mr. Netherwood promptly rose and shut it.

"I came to see you about the boy," he said at once. "I have waited for a fitting opportunity, and now I think I have found it."

"Yes, sir."

"Have you ever thought what you are going to do with him?"

"Why, no, sir—anyhow, not yet awhile. He's not old enough."

"You think not? Well, granting that he *is* young, you cannot afford to go on paying for his education?"

"I can, sir," she said timidly.

"I don't think so, and I think now it is time it ceased."

"What, his education, sir?"

"Yes."

"Oh / sir," she said, in piteous surprise, "he's only 'leven an' a half."

"There are many lads of eleven and a half profitably employed in trying to maintain themselves. I am afraid you will be disappointed, and I do not expect you to agree with me; but I must speak plainly, and I must ask you to trust to my judgment in the matter rather than your own. First of all,

are you earning enough to have anything left for yourself when you have paid for the boy?"

"Yes, sir. At first I had to take out of the bank to do it, then it got about level, an' now these last two years I'm savin' agen. I don't want but a very little myself, sir, an' oh, I *do* want Lin to be well edjucated!"

"I know you do. It is always our way to set too high a value on a thing which we ourselves do not possess. Believe me, you think more of education than it is actually worth; that is, than it is worth to the great majority of people, your boy with the rest. I have seen many lads do better without education than they would have done with; and in my opinion Lin is one of the boys who will do better—without. He has quite as much of the knowledge that is to be gained from books as he will require, for I want to tell you—in all possible kindness—that he is not, and that he never will be, what is called 'clever.'"

Annie's eyes filled with tears.

"He's no age," she faltered; "you can scarce tell, sir."

"Oh, yes, we can. If he were clever, I should advise you differently. He is bright and sharp enough; he is splendidly conscientious and safe; but in studies of the solid kind, such as arithmetic and so on, he is simply nowhere."

"I never could do sums myself," Annie said sadly.

"Well, you see, that has not stood in your way, and it will not stand in Lin's. We watch our boys very carefully, and try to develop any talent they may have. But Lin has no 'bent,' no fancy for any kind of trade, no hobby at all. This cripples us. With lads like this the only thing we can do is to watch for a suitable opening and place them out."

"How, sir?"

"In superior business-houses as assistants, messengers, errand-boys."

Annie looked hurt.

"I wouldn't like Lin to be that, sir. I wouldn't think it was good enough."

"That is a mistake. Every kind of honest work is good enough for an honest lad. If there is the right stuff in him, he will be content to begin at the bottom and to work himself up. Many a fine lad has been spoiled by the false pride of a 'coddling' mother, or the equally false pride of a father, who desires to give his son a soft berth where he himself has had a hard one. A soft berth makes a lad's muscles flabby, and flabby muscles make a flabby mind. There is much of

nobility in your desire to work for the boy that he may be idle ; but there is much, too, that is harmful. In any case, Lin could only remain with us for another year and a half. When he leaves he must do something ; can you tell us what ? ”

“ I had thought of sendin’ him to a good school fr or two, an’ then tryin’ to get him into some—some office,” said Annie, feeling that her ideas were lamentably hazy.

“ You could not afford it, and you would be making a great mistake. Give Lin two years’ more ‘schooling,’ and I will engage to say that he will be up to the ears in subjects which will be of no use to him, while all idea of his responsibility towards you will be lost in a false idea of his own value. *No !* Take your boy now, let him feel his own feet and learn to stand upon them, let him know what it is to earn the boots he wears upon them—that is the kind of schooling which will make him of some use to you and himself. He has one talent—a talent for music, but we could not cultivate that *seriously* ; it would mean much outlay and doubtful return. Our organist, Mr. Hoskins, is very fond of him, and helps him to pick up a bit of musical knowledge as he can. That may one day be some pleasure to him, and can do him no harm. He is a gentle lad, almost too affectionate and sensitive for a boy. Extra education will not help him *there* ; he wants his sensitiveness what is roughly called ‘knocked out of him.’ Do you think I am cruel ? ”

“ No, sir, I am sure you couldn’t be that. Have you got any place for Lin in your mind, sir ? ”

“ I have. That is what brought me here. There is a music shop close to us, the proprietor of which is well known to me. He has little to do with the shop himself. It is managed by Mr. Hoskins. They want a boy for errands, and we think Lin is *the* boy for the place.”

She was disappointed, humiliated, and, truth to tell, indignant. She was so proud of her slender, refined-looking lad, and had dwelt upon a future for him so different to this. Even her veneration for Mr. Netherwood turned to something like resentment. He had understood her so well, yet here he was urging her to send Lin out as an errand-boy. With great difficulty she restrained her tears.

Mr. Netherwood heartily disliked his task. He had anticipated this pained resistance, but he felt it necessary to save the lad from being spoiled.

“ Your idea of your duty to Lin is to be a perpetual umbrella to him,” he said, with a cheery laugh, “ and you

are all wrong. Don't shelter him, teach him to trust to God and to himself, as for the last eleven years you have done. He is not a tender plant, to be reared in a hot-house; he is a boy, with the making of a man in him, and a good man, too, if he is not ruined by over-much devotion."

"But an *errand-boy*!" she said piteously; "at work early and late, an' out in all weathers!"

"Rough weather will be good for him. Well-clad, well-shod, and well-fed, a healthy lad can snap his fingers at the weather."

"An' there's the other boys, sir. I wouldn't like Lin to be like the butcher's an' baker's an' veg'table boys as comes round here."

"He will be differently situated. In the first place, he will not be wanted until half-past eight in the morning. It will be his business to sweep out the shop, to clean the windows, to dust the pianos and other instruments, to deliver all music which has to be sent home, and to stay in the shop while Mr. Hoskins goes to dinner and to tea. He himself will have an hour for each of these meals, and the shop closes every evening at seven. I think you will allow that there is little hardship in such a situation as that."

"But where will he sleep and board, sir?"

"With safe people of our own selection. They already have two or three of our lads who are engaged during the day. You will have to pay the same as you are now paying for the boy; but he will be earning 4s. a week, which will be some help to you."

"I don't like the thought of it, sir," she said. "It have come to me like a shock. He's such a little bit of a thing to be earnin' his own livin'."

"But you will let him try?"

"I s'pose I must, sir. But if he finds it too hard, I shan't let him stop."

"He won't find it hard," Mr. Netherwood said cheerfully; "he will like it."

Mr. Netherwood was right. Lin did like it, and had not been at work for a month before he began to feel as if he were getting on in the world at a truly astonishing pace.

It is true that the sweeping out of the shop was more difficult than he had imagined it could be. The broom-handle was much too long, and there was no compromise about it somehow; but it grew manageable after a while, and Lin was one of those lads who, when he once saw his way, went right



on with a will, and never looked behind him. Lin's chief failing was his reluctance to strike out on an untried path. Fear of failure kept him back.

But the great source of his pleasure in his new life was his association with things musical. The smattering of music which his chorister's duties had bestowed upon him had coloured all his tastes and inclinations. He picked up notes more easily than he had ever done figures. By aid of a singularly accurate ear he picked up tunes he heard, and with fingers long and flexible he managed to play them in a singularly accurate manner. At first he did this on a convenient piano during Mr. Hoskins's dinner-hour; but Mr. Hoskins, instead of repressing, encouraged him.

"Deane," said he, "if you had been born in different circumstances you'd have made a good all-round musician. As it is, if you can get the chance of a little practice, you will do better than I am doing. You have more talent than I have, and a quicker ear. The Professor said when he was in again he'd try your voice; and if he thinks it good enough, he'll take you into his choir. I hope you will happen to be in."

It happened that Lin was in.

"Hallo!" said the Professor briskly, "so you are my new hand, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where are you going?"

"With a message for Mr. Hoskins, sir."

"Well, come here first, and let me see if you have lost that voice Hoskins talks about."

Lin followed his employer to the back of the shop, tried to use his voice, could not find it for some time, but at last fished it up from vasty depths in a very infirm condition.

Mr. Staniforth laughed.

"All right," he said, "I know. Your heart is in your throat, isn't it? I'm not in a hurry. Take your time and try again."

Thus encouraged, Lin tried until his voice came back, tried after it had come back, and then the Professor became attentive.

"I wish you were not nervous," he said brusquely. "You might earn a little for the next year or two if you could get over that. It's of no use if you couldn't."

Lin felt snubbed, and when the Professor left Mr. Hoskins said:

"Look here, Deane, put your nerves out, and the governor will give you a surplice in his choir. He won't take any further

trouble about you, because he's busy, and there are plenty of boys with voices and without nerves. I shall send somebody up to the school to do duty for me on Sunday, and I'll take you to his church."

Mr. Hoskins was as good as his word. Lin and he went early, invaded the vestry, found two extra surplices, and augmented the choir by two voices.

Now, Lin had a charming face, and a surplice has an etherealising effect on the appearance of the "human boy." The Professor made a note of that boy, and told him good-humouredly to turn up on Wednesday night for practice.

Lin obediently "turned up."

Also intent upon conquering his nerves, he turned up regularly afterwards, was at first taken little notice of, then gradually accepted without formal acknowledgment as a regular; and at last—oh, happy Lin—was paid half-a-crown a week, and looked upon as good enough for solo purposes.

It is true that on his first appearance as a soloist his heart played him tricks, and beat everywhere but in the right place; true that when he saw a sea of faces turn suddenly in his direction he wished it were a veritable sea, and would come up and drown him. But the waves receded, as it were, leaving him high and dry, ready to do better on the next occasion.

"Was it very bad?" he asked Mr. Hoskins piteously when they got out.

"No; it was just mechanical. Pure and true, but without any feeling. You'll come right in a week or two."

And Lin came right, so far right that the Professor grew proud of him; so did the congregation; so did Mr. Hoskins. In short, Lin tasted the sweets of popularity, and found them much to his liking. He grew accustomed to the smiles of recognition with which he was greeted by the young ladies of the congregation; he accepted them most frankly, and returned them too, so brimming over was he with kindness and happy content. He was such a "love of a boy," said the girls among themselves, and so "superior"!

Mr. Hoskins conceived quite an affection for him, often taking him about with him after the shop was closed, as well as on Sundays.

A mild and harmless young man was Mr. Hoskins, who parted his hair in the middle, who wore tinted spectacles, and who had drifted into membership of the local Philharmonic Society, into a mild course of oratorio, concert-going, piano

and organ playing, just as naturally as your fast young man drifts into horse-racing and patronage of variety theatres.

Mr Hoskins took Lin home to Camberwell, where on Sundays they had an early tea to admit of their getting back to their respective services, where Lin was always kindly received by Mr. Hoskins's mother and sister, where he was waited upon by a neat maid in a snowy cap and apron (who reminded him of his mother, and made him feel like a sneak), where he ate home-made cake and jam galore, and did thoroughly enjoy himself.

Sometimes he met Mr. Hoskins after service and returned with him to Camberwell to supper; then they usually found the rooms with the folding doors filled with young people all cut out on the Hoskins pattern—young people who were devotedly musical; who knew the "Messiah" and the "Elijah" by heart; who seemed to be living on the recollection of the last great oratorical performance, or for the sole purpose of attending the next; who were great upon Santley and Edward Lloyd, upon Lemmens Sherrington and Madame Patti, who discussed the "chorus" in technical terms, describing the "attack" as having been firm or wavering as the case might be, and set Lin wondering whether choral societies were given to fighting.

On these nights he usually slept at Camberwell. Then, in Mr. Hoskins's den upstairs, he would reverently study a big album filled with musical celebrities past and present, or a scrap-book filled with reminiscences of such celebrities, for at the shrine of musical fame was Mr. Hoskins always figuratively prostrate. Small wonder is it if Lin soon became prostrate too, and thought that to be able to take the solos in the "Messiah" was to be seated on the apex of human ambition, and to wield the *bâton* of a choral society's conductor was to reach the summit of human responsibility and importance.

Lin was not an obtrusive boy. If asked to sing he would do so at once, simply and unaffectedly, often smiling at the extravagant applause, but oddly unelated by it, which said not a little for his level-headed common sense. In truth, it was his mother's teaching which here came to his aid.

"You must remember this won't last," she said to him, when he told her of his successes; "don't forget that, there's a dear, or when your voice goes you'll be lost."

The boy did not forget.

"Some other fellow will come along and take my place," thought he, "as I took Ted Wilmot's. He hates me! I

wonder if I shall hate the other fellow. It wouldn't be fair, because I shall have had my turn."

During that winter he sang at "Readings" and at Institutes, also at private soirées, at first gratuitously, then for a modest but very acceptable fee; and still he was not spoiled, only became brighter, more intelligent—opening out, as it were, to new and sunnier influences.

His intense gratitude to Mr. Hoskins was a little unusual in a boy of his age, when boys are not as a rule openly grateful; and the relations between him and the people at Camberwell were cordial in the extreme.

On the occasion of one of his visits, Mrs. Hoskins bethought herself to ask him a few questions, commencing with what was to Lin a "poser."

"Who was your father, my dear?" she asked briskly.

The boy looked up, pondered the question for a few seconds, then said frankly, with a smile:

"I think, ma'am, I never had a father. If I had, I'm sure mother would have told me."

"Dear me!" said Mrs. Hoskins hurriedly. "I—I—see."

Which remark struck Lin as peculiar, because there was nothing to see. He here made a mental note. At the very first opportunity he would hand on that query to his mother. He did so. She, much startled, said:

"What do you want to know that for?"

"Nothing particular, only Mrs. Hoskins asked me, and I didn't know what to say."

"It didn't matter to her," said Annie quietly. "People should mind their own business."

"It wasn't much to ask," said Lin warmly; "and I'm sure she didn't mean to be inquisitive."

"She knows you come from the Home Schools."

"Yes, but the boys are not all orphans there. Some of their fathers are dead; but there were a good few whose fathers had left their mothers to do the best they could, and there were some who had fathers in prison."

Quite off her guard, Annie burst out:

"Your father was not like that. Don't ever get *that* in your head. *Your* father was a gentleman."

The boy opened his eyes in astonishment.

"Then I *had* a father?" said he. "Is he dead?"

She caught herself up—too late.

"Never mind that now," she said. "Some day when you're older I'll tell you."

The boy pocketed his curiosity and said no more. Nor did the matter weigh heavily upon him. He thought it over a bit, then came to a sensible and practical conclusion.

"Whoever he was, he couldn't have been up to much; and for all the help he's been to us, we might just as well not have had him at all."

Lin wiped his shadowy father off the tablets of his memory as a thing of no account, and enjoyed life in his own way.

The very shop in which his time was spent was dear to him. He loved the avenues of pianos and organs, the rows of violins and other stringed instruments, the busts of famous composers, even the holland-covered piles of music on the shelves. The shop was a happy land to him. There were many hours in which he stood about with no delivering to do; then he arranged the songs and pieces alphabetically, wrote neat catalogues of odd sheet music, and kept the spick-and-span new instruments quite free of dust. Also he fraternised with the tuners, and quickly understood the ins and outs of tuning as well as they. He managed to get "scrappy" practices, too, and proved himself to be an adept at sight-reading. In short, he picked up stray crumbs of musical knowledge as naturally as a newly-hatched chicken picks up its own living, and, in his eagerness to get on, was ever aided by Mr. Hoskins.

"Make the most of your time, Lin," his friend would say quietly. "In a year or two you will be up to trying over for people, and you will drift into a berth like mine. It isn't brilliant, perhaps, but it's very pleasant for a quiet fellow who is musical."

Lin made the most of his time, made fair progress, too, and was supremely well satisfied with the world as he found it.

But his mother was growing restless, and when she saw how wrapped he was in his business, and how indifferent to everything else, from being restless she became first irritable, then impatient, then actually jealous.

"Oh, dearie, do talk about somethink else," she said once, when Lin's tongue had been running on for an hour in the old groove; "your head's stuffed full of nothink but this music an' singin'. I gets tired of it. It do seem to me such a silly thing to make so much of."

The boy turned scarlet.

"I don't see how a thing can be silly when it gets one's living," he said; "the money hasn't been silly, anyway. It's *kept* me, mother."

"Yes, yes, dear; but it isn't like a thing what can last, is it?"

"My voice won't last, I know, but my music will."

"No, dear; where's the use o' talkin' like that? It's all very well for a pastime for them as can afford it, but you couldn't depend on it to keep you."

"Yes, I could, and I mean to," said Lin stoutly. "I mean to try for a situation like Mr. Hoskins's, and he says I'm pretty certain to get it. Then if I keep on and stick to it, I can help myself by being one of the organist's deputies, and by taking pupils like Hoskins does. Of course, I'm only a boy now, but a music-shop is what I'm cut out for, and the Professor has as good as said he'll give me one of the branch shops by and by. He says himself I'm very sharp at music, and that half the people who learn regularly don't get on like I do."

She shook her head.

"It's all very well," she said, "for them as have plenty besides. As to you being in a shop all your life, no, Lin, that won't do. I couldn't think o' that. If only you'd get some good learnin' books an' try to educate yourself as hard as you tries to learn to play the pianna, now, there'd be some sense in it, but it do seem to me that to waste so much time on *that* is worse than silly—it's wrong."

To Annie it did seem so.

Even when she suddenly remembered that *he* was a "celebrated singer," who assuredly earned his living by his singing, all the significance of the thought was done away with by another. Was he not also a gentleman, with time and means (Annie could not understand that a man may be a gentleman without means) to cultivate what she only thought of as a "pastime," a mere thing of leisure, a thing which might not be pursued by common people without incurring for them the danger of being thought presumptuous?

Annie set her face against this exasperating music, and was so anxious to impress upon Lin that he could not be allowed to earn his living thereby, that in her valour she forgot discretion, and somewhat alienated the boy by discussing the subject in season and out. He listened in silence, trusting to the future and to his own efforts to bring her round rather than to present rebellion. Still, her obstinate refusal to understand him damped him, and took something away from the happiness of his life.

It is doubtful whether she would have permitted him to remain at the music shop as long as she did, but for one of those little events which sometimes compel us to identify ourselves with a cause in which our hearts are not.

One morning when she was busy, Mr. Holt went down to her with a paper in his hand.

"Something of interest to you here, Emma," he said. "The shop where the boy is was broken into last night, and what money there was upon the premises, besides some valuable musical instruments, stolen. I daresay you will hear something about it during the day."

"Oh, dear!" cried Annie, turning faint, "I do hope they won't think that my boy had anything to do with it."

They did not think anything so absurd, but there was a good bit of talk about the burglary, and Mr. Hoskins waxed eloquent.

"If only the governor had listened to me," he said to Lin, "this could never have happened. I have said dozens of times that it was unsafe to leave these premises unprotected at night. Somebody ought to sleep here."

"Well, Hoskins," said the Professor, entering at the moment, "so your prophecy has been fulfilled at last. We have had a burglary, and you can have the pleasure of saying, 'I told you so.' I will sit down and give you the chance."

"I won't avail myself of your generosity, sir," said Mr. Hoskins; "but I will say there ought to be some one here at night."

"I suppose there will have to be some one. The thing is—where to find the 'some one.' You couldn't stay here without somebody else to look after you, and Deane would not care to find himself in the place alone, would you, Deane?"

"No, sir," said Lin, without hesitation.

"Now, Hoskins, have you any ideas upon the subject?"

"Well, sir, I think you might furnish two or three of the upper rooms, and pay a sort of caretaker. I'm sure a practice room here would pay, and the caretaker, or housekeeper, or whatever you called her, would be here early and late, just at such hours as people engaged during the day would want to practise."

"Not a bad idea," said the Professor; "but what woman would care to sleep on the premises alone?"

"I'm coming to that, sir. I would not mind furnishing my own bedroom here, and surely the housekeeper could look after me?"

"That is worth thinking over. Deane could sleep here, too. But where could we find a decent woman? I'm afraid, Hoskins, the domestic servant is a trial to which you are unaccustomed."

"If you please, sir," here broke in Lin, in high excitement, "there's my mother!"

"Where?" said the Professor, suddenly craning his neck in the direction of the street.

"At Merryon Square, sir—I didn't mean here—but I believe she'd come, and she'd do just what you want, sir; I'm sure she would. And if you want to know anything about her, sir, you could go to Mr. Netherwood. He'll tell you."

The Professor went to Mr. Netherwood, and that gentleman went to Merryon Square. The idea of the "housekeeper" seemed such a good one that he felt himself justified in recommending it to Annie's consideration. She thought of the change it would be for her; she thought of the pleasure of living under the same roof with Lin. Beyond *that* thought she could not get; it drew her away from Merryon Square with a power not to be resisted. Terrible was the outcry at No. 19, but Annie was not to be shaken in her determination to leave. At the end of a month she was established in the rooms over the music shop, was cooking for Mr. Hoskins and Lin, and taking care of their slender wardrobes; was surreptitiously doing Lin's work in the mornings before the shop was open, and was far, far happier than she ever had been or had ever expected to be.

For at last she and the boy had a home where they could be together.



## CHAPTER XXIV

### BACK AGAIN AT NO. 19

THOSE days in the rooms over the music shop were the happiest days of Annie Deane's life.

She was virtually her own mistress ; she enjoyed the hitherto unknown luxury of a little time she could call her own ; she lived above the area-level ; she was unharassed by petty tyranny ; and above all, she had the boy with her. She did not "save" nearly as much as she had been accustomed to do for the past two or three years, but Lin's singing fees were now considerable, and when his mother saw how he improved under her care she felt she could not regret her stationary banking account. To say that Lin himself was happy would not convey any idea of his absolute joyous content. To think that his mother was no longer under the pressure of Mrs. Holt's metaphorical thumb, to think that she was not compelled to wear a cap, or to get up at six, or to wait until nine for a cup of tea, to know that she had plenty of fresh air, and that she looked much younger and brighter in consequence, and that all this was due to a happy thought of his—why, was not this enough to make any boy happy ? Of course, it was ; and in the matter of selfishness, Lin was unlike other boys. Mr. Netherwood's prophecy concerning him had been verified. Early independence had strengthened him without abating one whit his natural gentleness ; working honestly himself, he could appreciate honest work in others, and he did earnestly appreciate it in his mother.

When his time was his own he did not care to appropriate it. Work over for the day, he would spring upstairs to know if his mother were going out or to help her with the supper. After supper he would sit down to the piano they were allowed to have in the room, and would try, with Mr. Hoskins's aid, to interest her in his progress.

Now Annie's power of obstinate resistance was great, and she never encouraged the boy ; but neither could she find the heart wherewith to actively oppose him, and time and custom

will blunt all but the most determined opposition. Mr. Hoskins's quiet reminder that music indoors was better than questionable company out, had its effect upon her. She let things drift—for the present.

So the three sat together in the dark evenings, and Annie learned something of the lives and peculiarities of the famous in the world of music; also, in looking through Mr. Hoskins's album she came upon a portrait that she knew.

"That is Mr. Le Quesne," the owner of the album said enthusiastically. "I heard him sing once in the Albert Hall, and am living in hope of some day hearing him again."

"I've heard his name before," Annie said, with calmness. "Mrs. Kemble used to talk about him, about the time as he was married."

"He is *not* married."

Her hands went hard together under cover of the table; her voice maintained its even tone.

"Isn't he? She said he was."

"No. He was to have married Mdlle. Le Breton. Everything was fixed and settled, when suddenly the matter dropped. Why, nobody knew."

"They did, I s'pose," she said, looking steadily at the portrait, which was of more recent date than her own.

"I expect they did. There was a lot of gossip about it, but I never heard anything definite. They are both singing still, but they never sing together; and I have been told by people who ought to know that neither of them would accept an engagement which would bring them together."

She turned over the leaves, and said no more concerning Mr. Le Quesne.

So he was still unmarried! Thank Heaven, she had not to remember that his happiness had been wrecked by any act of hers.

She heard his name often after that, knew where he was, even heard Lin talk of him, and smiled to herself as she looked at the boy and thought of all that name he uttered so glibly meant to him and to her. But she held her tongue, nor did Lin ever revert to that awkward question once asked him by Mrs. Hoskins.

Thus two years flew happily by—so happily that even Annie Deane turned away like a coward from the thought of the change that must come presently.

It came in due time to Lin and his mother.

First of all, the boy's perfect voice showed signs of breaking,

then very gradually left him. This took the gilt off things for Lin, both socially and pecuniarily. But he told himself he had known all along that his voice was not a permanent possession, and that he must face its loss pluckily. The Professor, who heartily liked the lad, gave him a rise, spoke a few words of encouragement, and told him to hold on steadily in the hope of better times to come.

When the sharp edge of the first trouble had worn off somewhat, there came along another—Mr. Hoskins fell in love.

Not mildly, inoffensively, modestly, as he did most things, but violently, melodramatically, hopelessly.

The lady was plump and pleasant, wore spectacles, sang soprano in the Choral Society's chorus, played Handel on the organ, and Mendelssohn on the piano, taught music on her own account, had written a song, and lived to hear somebody sing it, and, according to Mr. Hoskins, was generally "gifted."

"That's what she is, Deane," he would say confidentially to Lin, "she is *gifted*. That is the only word which seems to convey the correct impression of her—she is gifted!"

She certainly *was* gifted—with the power of transforming Mr. Hoskins from a mild-mannered, unobtrusive young man into an inconsequent, dreamy nonentity. But for Lin, something in the business must have gone wrong, for Mr. Hoskins was lost to all the realities except the reality of closing time. His breakfast didn't matter, his dinner was a farce, his tea got cold while he sat and stirred it, thinking all the time of "her," his supper was a necessary evil, the inclination to which he would fain have crushed because it interfered with his recollection of his divinity's giftedness. Supper was material, and clashed. Sleep was unnecessary waste of time, so Mr. Hoskins sat up and wasted gas instead, while he wrote whole sheetfuls of his own Impressions of Love; and its Effect upon the Human Soul. Which impressions he read to Lin, thereby half-killing the boy, who would lie with his mischievous young face buried in a pillow, and his irreverent young body shaking with laughter.

"Deane," said the Professor one day to him privately, "what are you doing with Hoskins? Is he bewitched?"

"That's about it, sir," said the boy, with a twinkle in his eyes.

"But what's to be done?"

"Ah, that I don't know, sir, if it's going to *last*."

"It *is* lasting. It has been on these three or four months, and I am getting anxious."

"So am I, sir; and do you know that I sometimes think it will last until he's—married!"

Now Lin said this seriously, but the Professor shouted with laughter.

"Deane," said he, "you know more than you think you do. Most lads of your age know less. I'm afraid you are right. Hoskins will have to marry while he has any sense left. It's a bad case, Deane; I never saw a worse."

The Professor was a kindly soul, who took a great interest in all his people. He spoke to Mr. Hoskins, and found him not only willing but anxious. His gifted *fiancée* was not unwilling either, but here things came to a standstill. The material side of life now demanded a hearing. What about a house, and the rent thereof, and the furniture, and the bread and cheese and things, and the washing?

"But I assure you, sir," said Mr. Hoskins eagerly, "that besides being a gifted girl she is domesticated. And if it were not for our excellent housekeeper, Deane's mother, I should say, 'Why not let us live here?' We could take care of the premises, and it would be less expensive to you."

"Yes, yes," said the Professor hurriedly; "but I couldn't sack Deane's mother. I really couldn't do that."

"Exactly, sir; that is just what I said. If it were not for her we could have lived here."

The Professor was not able to see a way out of the difficulty, and the matter dropped. But as time went on, Annie began to see how matters were, and to understand that it was she who stood in Mr. Hoskins's way.

"We're done here," she thought to herself. "It have bin pleasant, an' I've had a good long rest, but it's over. I shall have to get another place, an' Lin must get into somethink better."

She did not lose time. She resolved to go to the Home that day and announce herself as being at liberty. But she never went, for as she opened the side door to depart she came face to face with a telegraph boy bearing a message to her from Merryon Square, where her immediate presence was earnestly desired.

She went at once, just in time to see the little old lady alive, and to promise her that she would stay and take care of the poor, grief-stricken little old man.

In less than a month she was back in Merryon Square, and Mr. Hoskins had ceased to write down his "Impressions of Love on the Human Soul," or to sit up half the night for the purpose. There was no necessity, for Mrs. Hoskins, though gifted, was a practical soul, and would have objected.

## CHAPTER XXV

### ANNIE HAS HER OWN WAY

ANNIE was back again in Merryon Square, but upon a very different footing to the old one. Now she was to all intents and purposes her own mistress, was spoken of by the old gentleman as "My housekeeper," had her assistant in the kitchen, and herself presided at the dining-room table.

Thus she left the old days of general service behind her for ever, and was glad of it, not so much for her own sake as for the sake of the boy.

Lin was happy as ever. He lived with the Hoskins just as he had lived with his mother, and was as great a favourite of Mrs. Hoskins as he was of her husband's. He was never in the way of the young couple, because after closing time he invariably found his way to Merryon Square, where he was always sure of two very desirable things—a hearty welcome and a good supper. He had two homes now, he would say happily, and though his actual wages were small, why, "money was not everything," and there were many privileges which money could not buy.

But Lin's content was not shared by his mother, who was grievously dissatisfied, and never ceased to agitate for a different sort of life for the lad. She found a warm supporter in the old man, who, being rid of the fear of his wife, and having no kin of his own, resolved to help Lin on in the world.

"Be patient," he would say to Annie cheerily; "I have set the proper machinery in motion, and we shall hear of something presently."

It happened that Lin himself heard of this "something" on his sixteenth birthday, which he spent by invitation in Merryon Square, and remembered bitterly to the end of his life. Tea was cleared away, and Annie's work-basket was on the table, when Mr. Holt, with a beaming face and many a gentle pat on Lin's shoulder, told the lad that his life at Brixton must shortly end; that after some difficulty, and by means of

the payment of a fifty-pound premium, he would presently find himself in the office of a big city firm.

The boy dropped back against the wall in sheer surprise.

"What, sir?" he said, turning pale. "Why, the 'Firm' have not seen me, and—and—I have never been consulted in the matter at all."

"Ah, that is all right enough. I shall take you up myself next week, and this berth has been keeping warm for you these two years. I promised your mother all along that I would not forget you, and I have not forgotten. You will get no salary for the first year, that is not to be expected; but after that you will start at fifty pounds a year—not by any means bad that for a lad of seventeen, eh?"

"Yes, sir, I daresay; but who's to find the fifty pounds for the premium?"

"Why *me*, dear," put in Annie, who shook like a leaf as she met the boy's stern look. "What ever else have I been savin' for if it wasn't to give you a good start in life?"

He stood away from the wall and looked her quietly in the face.

"Thank you, mother," he said, with evident self-repression, "but your fifty pounds must never be spent on that. I've started myself in life, and I shall stick to the road I've chosen. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but you shouldn't have disposed of me without asking my opinion. I'm not a stone nor a mummy. I'm sorry if you are going to think yourself badly treated, but to be boxed up in an office is the last thing I desire, and I see no reason why I should be made to lead a life that would go dead against me."

"Dear, dear," said the little old man; "come, come, now!"

"It's true, sir, and I repeat it. I'm happy where I am, and I want to be let alone. Suppose I am only earning a little, you can't get me more. On the contrary, you pay out to get me nothing at all for a year! Who's to keep me while I earn nothing for a year? My mother? Not if I know it! I'd rather live on five shillings a week of my own earning until I could prove that I was worth more. My mother kept me long enough, and now I'm off her hands. I'm too old to be thrown on them again. All she has got she wants herself. Why," finished the boy passionately, "what the—the—dickens should I be *worth* if I could let her throw away fifty pounds on me now?"

"Lin," Annie said gently, "to give you a good start have bin

the thought that's kep' me alive; Don't talk as if you was grown up away from me, dear—it's foolish."

"It is not, mother—it's sense. I tell you I have started myself, and I'm going my own road."

"No, no, my boy," interposed Mr. Holt; "*that* no man may say, much less a boy. Our own road is so often a bad road for us, that well is it if we get turned back at the Turnpike Gate of Duty. Now, duty to your mother must be your first consideration. She has been more than a mother to you. She has had a double part to play, and she has done it very well."

The boy's flashing eyes dropped, his under-lip and chin quivered a bit.

"I know, sir," he said, "I know all about that, and don't you think I forget it. It's just this which makes me say she has done enough for me. I can't let her do any more."

"So you wish to make her life of no account to her by way of showing your independence? Take the care of you away from her, and what has she left to live for? And yet you withdraw yourself from her at sixteen, and tell her you don't want her any longer."

"I do! I do!" cried Lin, in distress. "Where's the *use* of saying cruel things like that? I love my mother, and she shall have all the consideration I know how to give her; but I want consideration, too—I want to be understood. As long as I can get my own living—and I *can* get it—why not let me get it in my own way? Why force me into something that would be hateful to me? There's no *sense* in that, or if there is, I can't see it."

"If 'twas anything good enough," here put in Annie eagerly, "I'd let you stop; but I've always made up my mind that you never *should* stop behind a counter."

"It's not being behind a counter," said Lin quickly. "I shouldn't like that myself. I am getting on. Already Mr. Hoskins has pupils—pupils that are not forward enough for the Professor, or who can't afford his terms, and I'm getting every day more fit to take his place in the shop. I shall get on; I *will* get on; my heart's in it. Look back at the last five years, and see if I've not got on as it is. I went there to sweep out the shop and to clean the windows, and now I can serve as well as Mr. Hoskins can, and anything in the ordinary way I can play at sight. Hoskins has helped me, I know; but it is my own plodding that has helped me most, and I'm proud of it. Since I was twelve I've kept myself, and if I can't keep

myself now, then I'll live on bread and cheese until I can get something better; but I won't be stoved up in an office, mother—no, not even to please *you*."

She did not say a word, but the big tears chased each other down her cheeks and fell upon her work-worn hands. Now, Lin's heart was tender, and those big, bright tears broke it altogether. He went up and wiped them away.

"Look here, mother," he said, in a protecting grown-up sort of way, which would have been pathetic had it not been comical, "I know no mtoher on earth ever meant to be kinder to a fellow than you mean to be to me, but you don't *understand*, so you have made a mistake, that's all. I know I'm not doing anything wonderful at present, but I'm no age; and as I said just now, I mean to get on. The Professor is awfully kind. When he gave me that last rise he said he knew it wasn't much, but that if I liked to hold on for a year or two he would see that something better turned up for me presently. Besides, I can tune as well as any man we've got. Let me alone, and trust me to take care of myself. Keep your money in the bank, and some day, when I'm old enough, it will go to furnish a house which, if I know anything, I shall be able to keep going. I'll look forward to keeping you as much as you like, but I've done with letting you keep me."

She smiled at his boyish confidence, at what she considered his boyish ignorance, but was not one whit moved by it. She and Mr. Holt returned to the attack with calm persistence, and Lin stood it without flinching. They spent a couple of hours in persuasion and argument, and when the boy left neither they nor he had budged an inch. He made up his mind to ignore the whole matter, and he did so until, finding that the Professor had received notice of his removal, he could do so no longer. Then he saw that his mother meant to have her own way, and he resisted with all his might.

His chief hope was in the Professor himself.

"Unless you dismiss me, sir," he said, with white lips and flashing eyes, "I shall not go. I can't help what other people happen to think best for me. I'm your servant, and I want to stop here."

"And I am very willing that you should," said the Professor; "but you see, Deane, I don't want to stand in your light."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Well, Mr. Holt called upon me, and I understood something that I had not done until then. The old man is well-to-do, and has no kin of his own."



"What of that, sir?"

"What of that? Why, he may as well take an interest in you as anybody else, mayn't he? As a matter of fact, Deane, if you humour the old man a bit, you may presently find yourself in luck's way, and that without doing anyone else any injury."

"I wouldn't take the trouble to give that a thought, sir," said Lin, with contempt; "and I shouldn't like myself if I could 'humour' a kind old man for what I could get. You are mistaken if you think he is to pay this premium. My mother's savings are to go for that."

"Yes, but then you see you get a good home with them, and your mother's savings are sure to be refunded presently. No, Deane, I'm sorry to part with you, and if I could offer you anything as good as this berth you are going into, I would say 'Stay;' but I can't, so I feel it my duty to turn you over to your friends. Don't think me unfriendly, and don't make yourself unhappy. Your music will be a capital amusement for you, and wherever you go, my lad, you're as sure to make friends as the sun is sure to shine. You've got the knack—don't lose it."

Lin felt himself dismissed—as, indeed, he was. He gave up hope then, and grew very quiet and unlike himself.

"You mean to persist, mother?" he said, in final appeal. "You are really going against me?"

"My dear, it's for your good—on'y for that."

"Never mind my good—you mean me to go into this office?"

"Yes, dear, *please*."

He gave her an odd look from his near-set eyes which made her uncomfortable.

"Very well," he said slowly; "if this is my duty, mother, I'll do it; but you have misunderstood me in a way that it will take me a long time to forget. I'll try to forgive you, because you don't *know*. If you did, you wouldn't be so cruel."

She turned away, and walked her room for the best part of that night; but she was too obstinate to give way as long as she believed herself to be in the right. The premium was paid, and Lin went into the City office.

For the first few months everything was very wretched. The lad himself was like a plant which, suddenly inverted, was yet expected to thrive. His sweet and sunny temper, rendered sweeter and sunnier by independence, changed to a weary irritability very painful to see. With the extravagant obstinacy

of youth, he turned his back upon everything connected with his old life, upon his old pleasures and his old friends. The very mention of music he forbade himself, nor would he suffer a melody to enter his head, but would fiercely crush it down and turn from it in actual pain. No jilted lover ever felt more completely cut off from all that is good in life than Lin did for those first months in his new berth. His mother began to waver, to wonder if, after all, she had made a mistake, and to know what it is to pay too dearly for one's own way. She suffered much in those days, for the lad seemed other than her lad, and daily drifted further away from her. He had taken up his residence in Merryon Square as he had taken up his new occupation, because he was desired to, because he had no means of providing himself a home elsewhere; but when Annie flew to the door to let him in, he would pass into the hall with his shoulder raised between his mother's wistful face and his own, then at night he would slip upstairs on some pretext or other, and Annie knew this was done to shirk her good-night kiss. He seldom looked her in the face, and—when he did speak—spoke in a self-repressed way which never failed to cut her to the heart.

"I've had my way," she kept telling herself drearily. "I did it all for the best, but I'm afraid I've bin wrong. His music had got too much a hold over him. If I'd took him away sooner, it would have bin all right. He looks that bad and thin! An' he doesn't seem like my Lin at all."

Even the old man grew uneasy, although he would not own it.

"Don't watch him about so," he would say impatiently, "and do let him alone. Take no notice of his little tantrums, and he'll come round all the sooner."

Lin did come round after a bit as far as the old man was concerned, for it suddenly dawned on him that he was deeply indebted to him for board and shelter, and that if he accepted hospitality he might return it in simple kindness and attention. He set himself to do this; and felt all the better for it, reading the old man the news of the day, or going out with him, or playing him an occasional game of cribbage or draughts. Also he came round sufficiently to make new friends in the office, and to find for himself new life and interest in the world of books, still, from his two old loves, from his music and his mother, he turned away in sensitive pain. Both had been so dear to him, and both had so cruelly failed him!

His manner to Annie was never anything but civil, his voice never anything but cold. At last she could bear it no

longer, and one night when he went to bed she followed him into his room.

"Lin," she said, "what have I done?"

"What do you mean?" said he, attentively looking at the wall.

"You didn't kiss me."

Lin was silent.

"Did you forget, or are you got too old?"

"Neither," he said drearily, sitting down on the edge of his bed; "I'm tired, and wanted to come to bed."

"You never used to get tired, dear. Is it that you're not well? I've thought lately that you haven't bin."

She went nearer, getting up courage to touch him; he divined her intention, and rose to frustrate it.

"What is it that you want? Of course, I'll kiss you if you want me to. Good-night."

"Stop, dear. You know I want you to kiss me, but first I want to know why you don't."

He thought a moment with set lips and his hands in his pockets.

"Well," he said at last, turning white, "I think you've yourself to blame, mother. You taught me to value sincerity—*honesty*—second to nothing in the world. When I used to kiss you I *meant* it, and when I can mean it again I will kiss you again, but I can't make-believe. I should feel like a—a—*Judas*!"

She stood a second or two, then :

"Very well, my son," she said patiently, and turning out of his room, she shut the door.

Whereupon Lin felt like a dozen Judases rolled into one, and thought he would go and find her up and kiss her at once. But her obstinacy was reproduced in him, and though he could not sleep for thinking of her, he did not go.

"I can't," he kept telling himself. "I simply cannot forget it. I can forgive the others, because I was nothing to them; they didn't pretend to have any love for me. But she *did*. She lived with me day after day for two years. I never kept any thought or hope I had away from her. She must have known—she *did* know, and she trampled my hopes underfoot without a grain of pity. Well, I did all I could—I gave in; but she can't expect me to be the same to her. *That* is impossible."

And he was not the same to her—quite; but he was better than he thought he was, and her quiet, patient face soon began

o cut him like a knife. Before many days had passed, he had sent over her chair and kissed her of his own accord.

"We are coming on," the old man chuckled delightedly. "Stop until the end of the year, when we begin to take our salary, and we shall be as right as a trivet!"

And at the end of the year, or rather some little time after the year had ended, Lin certainly brightened, and began to grow back into his own likeness; but the salary was not the cause. The cause was his old friend Hoskins, who looked him up, and having found him, insisted on taking him home to see Mrs. Hoskins and the—baby.

Lin blushed and felt awkward at first, but the baby, who had attained the dignity of short petticoats, and buttoned shoes that were perpetually falling off, was of a friendly turn, and spoke to Lin straightway; and, what was more astonishing, Lin spoke to the baby.

Hoskins rated him soundly for having utterly shelved his music.

"No wonder you look dismal," he said; "why, I'm sure you can't have been happy if you have never touched a piano. You must have been starved!"

"He looks thin enough," Mrs. Hoskins said affectionately, and—yes—anything but happy."

"Happy?" said Lin, with a laugh; "no, I certainly have not been that. I am afraid the sight of you will send me back to my old habits."

"Bravo!" said Hoskins. "Take up your music again by all means. At least, it is a harmless hobby, and even a business man must have a hobby."

Lin gave way to his old habits, and, after business hours did two or three times a week find his way to the familiar rooms over the shop, sometimes taking Hoskins's place in the shop while that gentleman gave a lesson, sometimes going for a walk with him, sometimes going back to supper with him; but always feeling thoroughly at home, much more so than he had ever felt in Merryon Square.

Even his salary was of small comfort to him, for the love of independence had been so early ground into him that he refused to accept what he thought to be an old man's charity. Which refusal caused that old man genuine grief.

"Isn't your being here a great pleasure to me?" said he. "Don't you think that I should miss you very much? That on those evenings which you spend elsewhere I'm like an old fish out of water? Haven't I known you since you first began

to toddle? And don't you know that even an old buffer of eighty or thereabouts likes a young face and a young voice about him? Dear me, dear me! wouldn't I rather pay you a good salary just to keep you, than I'd lose the pleasure of having you about me."

"You are very good, sir," said Lin; "but I can't look at this thing in the way you look at it, and I shouldn't be worth much if I could. I must try to keep up appearances on as little as I can, and I shall turn over the rest for the privilege of living here. Unless you agree to this, I must find a room for myself, or share some other fellow's."

So he walked to Brixton when he might have ridden, protected the soles of his well-worn boots with patent abominations the sight of which made his mother cry, took more care of his clothes than a girl takes of her love-letters, and ate his heart out because of his false and—to him—humiliating position.

Even when his salary was raised he was little better off, for unhappiness, together with the confinement of the inner office, undermined his health, and compelled him either to give up or to seek medical advice. He did the latter secretly, and secretly paid the bills. In this way his third year in the office wore away.

The fourth opened badly. The summer was long, intensely hot, and Lin's powers of endurance were taxed to the utmost. He held on from day to day, making no complaint, but on many occasions finding himself unable to stick to his desk when he went to business. Then he would commit the extravagance of a 'bus, and would go to Brixton rather than to Merryon Square, being too proud to show his mother this unpleasant result of his being forced out of his natural groove.

"Anything," thought Lin doggedly, "rather than she should break her heart over me, and make a fuss. I'll go till I drop, and then it won't take long to finish me."

Once at Brixton he always felt better. Mrs. Hoskins was good to him, but in a cheery way, which did not embarrass him, and which won for her the affection and confidence that Annie had alienated from herself.

A summer holiday, spent with his Brixton friends by the sea, set Lin up again for a time; but when the summer heat had held its sway, the fogs and damp of the London winter held theirs, and a very potent one it proved to a tired young fellow who began to feel as if some lifeless weight were laid upon his shoulders and tightening about his chest. In truth, he was all

but done up, and his increasing delicacy of appearance could no longer escape remark.

"Lin, what is the matter with you?" cried his mother one night in despair, when he went straight up from the front door to bed. "You're never well now, and yet you won't tell me a word about it."

"There's nothing the matter," he said quietly, "nothing at all. We have scarcely been able to see across the office all day, even with the gas lit. How can a fellow feel brilliant in such an atmosphere as that? And I had to walk home through it; the 'buses ceased running early in the day. I feel half-strangled. A London fog never suited me."

"I shall send for a doctor," said Annie.

"I've been to one."

"What did he say?"

"Oh, nothing that one could afford to pay attention to. Don't worry. Good-night."

"No, no! You must have something. I'll light a fire here, and bring you something up."

"Don't, please. I couldn't eat it."

Lin gently dismissed her. Moreover, to be quite sure that she did not reappear, he followed her to the door and locked it. Then he kicked off his boots and lay down to scrape together sufficient strength and courage to undress and get into bed. But he was at his post at the usual time on the following morning, and managed to get to Brixton the following night. After which he took to going there quite as often as to Merryon Square, and when asked why, he would answer that Brixton agreed with him, and that the Hoskins were so jolly kind!

Sorely jealous of the Brixton people was Annie in those days, and sorely wretched, too. Such was the unsatisfactory state of things which prevailed right up to the spring preceding Lin's twentieth birthday.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### LIN HAS HIS

ON a certain stormy day in early March, Lin promised his mother to come home to tea instead of going to Brixton. He usually kept his promises, but that evening the tea-table stood in untouched readiness until nearly seven, when Annie roused the little old man, who sat dozing by the fire.

"He isn't comin'," she said patiently. "I suppose he didn't feel well again, an' so went—*there*, as usual."

The old man drew up to the table.

"Never mind," he said cheerily; "I daresay they're livelier company than we are. Perhaps there's a girl at Brixton, Emma? I shouldn't be surprised. There *are* such things as girls, you know, and the boys are sure to find them out. Let him alone, and have your tea in peace. Dear, dear, what an unhappy creature is a mother with a boy!"

"But it rains so heavily," she said; "an' wherever he is, he wouldn't take a cab."

When tea was over she put a shawl over her head and stood at the front door watching the driving rain.

"What a night," she said, with a shiver, "an' he is so ill! I know it won't be long before he'll give in an' own it. Even then I believe he won't let me do anythin' for him. Oh, if I could but see my time over agen, I'd never force him agenst his will."

It was long past nine when Lin, drenched to the skin, ran up the steps.

Annie flew to the door. "Oh, my darlin', are you wet?"

"Well, mother, I am wet. I'll go straight to bed. No, I won't, though. I will tell you something before I go."

Here the old man shuffled to the dining-room door, where he stood and shook his fist.

"You are killing your mother with anxiety, young man," said he, "and yourself with your own confounded obstinacy. If I wasn't so old and so shaky I'd pitch into you."

Lin laughed, and coming into the light of fire and gas,

showed his mother a pair of brilliant eyes, with two patches of colour under them much too vivid to be safe. Her colour answered them in a sudden panic of fear.

"Do go to bed," she said, "an' don't stan' here in your wet clothes."

"I can't go until I've got rid of what I want to say. I was queer this morning, and Mr. Williams told me to take the day off. I felt better when I got outside, so I went to Brixton, and during the afternoon the Professor looked in. I had not seen him for nearly two years, so I walked up to his own house with him. I have come from there now."

He looked at his mother's anxious face, and touched it kindly with an ice-cold hand.

"I'm very sorry to disappoint you, dear," he said, in his own old affectionate way; "but you have had your way for nearly four years, and it has not answered either for you or for me. So now I am going to have my way—I am going back to my old life."

She put up her hands and covered her face. Lin took them away and drew them round his neck.

"But for the thought of your hard-earned fifty pounds, mother, I should never have stuck to this as I have. But now I must give it up, or it will give *me* up. Dear old Staniforth owned to-day that he always had a hope of my voice being of permanent value to me, but had been afraid to tell me so because I might have built too many hopes on what he said, and everybody is liable to be mistaken. Now there can be no mistake. My voice is weak, but that is due to my ~~state~~ state of health, and as I get better it will get stronger. I am going back to Brixton, and he is going to coach me up a bit. I am awfully sorry, on *your* account; but if I keep on at this sort of thing I shall run you to the expense of a funeral."

He laughed as he spoke, but he shivered too, and seemed excitable and unlike himself.

Annie controlled herself at once.

"Very well, dear. As long as you're happy I'll try to be happy too. If I made a mistake about the life I chose for you, it's bin on'y out o' love for you, an' you must forgive me."

"What nonsense!" cried Lin hastily; "as if I didn't understand that. The Professor was delightfully candid. He said, 'Now I am not saying that you will ever be Sims Reeves or Lindsay Le Quesne, but I *am* saying that you will have a tenor voice good enough to ensure you moderate



success. Anyhow, you can earn more on a platform than you can in an office, or I am making a great mistake."

"Yes, dear," Annie interposed firmly; "but I can't let you stan' here another minute in these soakin' things. Your coat is beginnin' to steam."

He let her take the coat off, talking all the while upon the subject of which his head and heart were both full. But presently Annie and the old man combined, and persuaded him to go to bed.

"Don't lock your door," his mother said, as he went; "I shall be up in ten minutes with some coffee."

But when she took it up, Lin turned away with a shudder.

"Not to-night, dear," he said, "I'd rather have water. I feel sick and shivery. I daresay it's nothing. You can stay with me a bit, if you like."

She sat down on the bed and talked to him until he grew drowsy. Then she turned the gas low, left the door ajar, and crept away to her own room. In spite of her disappointment about the office, she felt happier than she had done for years. The cloud between Lin and herself had quite cleared away. He was *her* Lin again, boyish and frank and affectionate, so all the rest might go.

But the next day there was trouble in Merryon Square. Lin was evidently in for a sharp illness, and the heart of Lin's mother stood still with fear. Nor—when summoned—did Mr. Holt's much-trusted medical man bring her any comfort. It is true that he was very cheerful, but then he was that even when he undertook to account for his patient's extreme prostration, and did it, too, with exasperating ease. He was cheerful even while explaining to Mr. Holt and Annie that, under the circumstances, it really would not be anything remarkable if Lin failed to pull through.

"Because, you see," said he, "he must have been below the mark for some time past. I wonder that he has not complained, or that you have not noticed anything amiss. I think you told me that he is a clerk."

"Yes, sir," said Annie stonily.

"Well, now, I should not let him stick to that. Through such a season as we have had, the atmosphere of a gas-lit office has been slow poison to him. He can never have been robust, and a sedentary occupation in a close room was not the thing for him. I know it is difficult to regulate these matters, but I must point out to you how easy I find it to trace his present condition back to its cause, and that no skill brought to bear

upon a sudden development or—or—effect can be expected to neutralise a mischief of such long standing.”

Annie bore the doctor's lecture as well as she could, but she stood stupidly still when it was ended, and even forgot to attend the lecturer to the front door. His every word was a stab to a heart already very sore. To see Lin suffer was bad enough, but to know herself the cause was torture unbearable.

The kind old man could have killed his much-trusted medical adviser for speaking out in such brutal fashion.

“Don't take any notice,” said he angrily; “it isn't worth while. They are expected to say something, and they must say it. Half the time they don't stop to consider what they do say. Now, only think of what this man says, and see how ridiculous it is on the face of it! As if the atmosphere of any office could have given the boy inflammation of the lungs and—and—complications! Now, I ask anybody in common fairness if the office could have given him *that*? Didn't he get soaking wet yesterday, when he wasn't well to start with, and then walk home like the pig-headed young fool that he is? Did the office do that? Did the office put him into the raging fever of excitement he was in when we were persuading him to get out of his wet clothes and go to bed? Absurd!”

“He'll die!” she moaned wretchedly. “I know he'll die, an' I shall be to blame for it.”

“He *shan't* die!” said the old man, thumping the table with his fat little fists. “I say he *shan't* die, if we have to get the finest advice in all London.”

And Lin did not die, though for the next fortnight there was some fear of his doing so—so much fear, indeed, that his pale mother might easily have stepped on to a pedestal to pose as a model for “Grief,” or “Dread,” or “Remorse,” or any other of the acute woes to which humanity is a victim. She looked so wretched that Lin really tried his hardest to fan into a flame his feeble spark of a desire to live; which may have had something to do with his ultimate success. At any rate, having shaved the dangerous corner, he found himself on the high road to recovery, where, however, he was met by a formidable obstacle. His cheerful doctor, backed up by a famous specialist, said that so far his progress was satisfactory, but that he felt it his duty to be extremely candid. The spring promised to be backward and cold, and unless his patient were sent somewhere out of reach of its treacheries he would not answer for consequences.

In other words, Lin was ordered abroad.

Annie went up to her own room, and there thought the matter out, with this result : She resolved for the second time in her life to find that celebrated singer, who was not yet married, and then to ask him if this, his son, would have to die for want of a little money. She had a little herself, but she had no idea what the expense of going abroad might prove to be. Whatever it was, *he* had enough and to spare ; she would go to him. Besides, if Lin had really made up his mind to follow music as a profession, why, here was a splendid chance. Surely Mr. Le Quesne would not refuse to extend him a helping hand ? Surely here was her opportunity. For herself she wanted nothing, but for Lin's sake she would lower herself to *ask*. In hot haste she went downstairs, and, collecting a heap of Lin's musical papers, carefully looked them through. But she had never seen the name of "Le Quesne" in print, and the great difference in the spelling and the pronunciation of it baffled her completely. She actually found it and spelt it over laboriously to herself, but it was associated with many others, all of the unpronounceable and unfamiliar type.

"These are foreign names," said she, with a sigh of despair, "and tho' his is a funny name, I know it's English. It must be, since he's an Englishman. I'll have to lead Lin on to talkin' about him, then I'll ast how he spells the name an' where he's to be found. Lin wouldn't think it funny o' me astin', and he'd be sure to know where he is."

Full of this design upon Lin's innocence, she went up to his room, and found Mr. Holt keeping him company.

"Ah !" said the old man, as she opened the door, "here you are. Come in and sit down. We have something to say to you."

She sat down on the arm of Lin's easy-chair and took his head on her shoulder.

"Leave him alone," said the old man testily, "and don't coddle him up so. He'd need to go away for a bit, or he'll fancy he's a girl."

Annie only laughed, and held him closer.

"You see, we are face to face with a difficulty. That is, with what might be a difficulty, if we had not seen our way to turn it into an opportunity."

The old man was beaming.

"Yes, sir ?" said Annie, rather puzzled.

"This precious boy of yours, not content with trying to kill himself, is trying to kill you. Now, if he kills you, who is to see after me ? I can't let him kill you, so I have to set about

making him look after himself. And I can do it. Do you know how?"

He stopped and rubbed his fat hands together, as he beamed upon the pair opposite him.

"No, sir," said Annie, rather drearly.

"I can send him abroad, and pay the piper, and be very glad to see the back of him."

Lin shook his head.

"Nonsense, sir," said he, with decision. "You're a brick, I know, but already you have done more for me than I care to remember, seeing how utterly it is out of my power to repay you. As to this going abroad, it is simply not to be thought of. Thousands of better men than I will have to stay in England this spring and take their chance. The doctors ordered me away because they mistook my position in this house."

"Will you hold your impertinent tongue, sir?" said the little old man, in a bad imitation of a fury. "*You* are nobody, sir; but your mother's son must be looked after whether he will or no. Did I not say just now that if you killed your mother I should be at the mercy of a slipshod 'general' and a drunken charwoman? What have I done that you should condemn me to that? Oh! I'm nearly eighty, but I'm not done for yet. I shall want a lot of attention for some time to come, and I'm not going to let you do me out of it."

Lin laughed, but said nothing.

"So I am going to get rid of you. Never mind what I have done for you and what I have not. If I were doing anyone any wrong—" He stopped and suddenly became very serious, then resumed: "In a moment of weakness I promised my dear wife that the bulk of my property should go to her niece. I wish most heartily that I could have found courage to refuse. But a promise is a promise, and I must keep mine. Still, in my will I have left you a little matter of two hundred pounds. I suppose I can leave you two hundred pounds, can't I? or will your confounded pride kick at it?"

"You are awfully good, sir; but if you had anything which you felt justified in leaving away from your own people, my mother stands before me."

"Let your mother alone, and don't interfere with what does not concern you. I am talking about *you*. If you go on like this your two hundred won't be any good to you. You will give it the slip, and somebody else will go on the spree with it. *Now*, it seems to me that it can take you out of reach of the

east winds, and when you have pulled round a bit it can give you the chance of studying under somebody who will turn you out fit to earn it all back again. We want money when we *do* want it, and now is the time you want this, so I wrote this cheque last night, and here it is ; and if you don't leave off worrying your mother into her grave, I'll wash my hands of you for an unnatural monstrosity."

Lin tried hard to say something, but he was still very weak. He could not find his voice, and the fat little figure opposite him seemed dancing about in a fire-lit mist. He dragged himself on to his feet and offered the old man a thin hand, which that little human fairy accepted with effusion, though without words, afterwards discovering that he had left his handkerchief downstairs, and trotting off to find it, rubbing his hands all the way, and feeling like a schoolboy as he thought of the happiness he had left behind him.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### "MR. WARRENER"

LIN pulled round with a rapidity which surprised everyone, himself included. Three weeks after that talk with Mr. Holt he was fit to travel. His belongings were collected in various heaps, and his mother, dim-eyed and heavy-hearted, had begun to think of "packing." For she and Lin had never before been far apart, and to her this "going abroad" was a terrible thing, fraught with much danger, and suggestive of the parting which is final. Still, it was necessary that Lin should go, and as he was not only happy, but eager to go, she did her best to put on a brave front. At last all was ready. The Hoskins had been up on the Sunday to have tea and to say good-bye, the Professor himself had looked in on the Monday afternoon, and had given Lin two or three letters of introduction to musical friends of his own in the land of sunny skies and sweet voices. Now, on the Monday night, Annie and Lin sat together by his bedroom fire for the last time. To-morrow would find him on the first stage of his journey.

"I say, mother," said he suddenly, "I shall spend my twenty-first birthday away from you."

"Yes, dear!"

"I thought of that to-day, and then I remembered something that you once promised to tell me."

She sat upright, and putting one hand behind her, grasped her chair hard. She knew what that "something" was.

"What was it about?" she said, turning rather sick.

"You promised to tell me who my father was."

She did not speak.

"You may as well tell me before I go."

He saw her shrink, and noticed the curious distress upon her face.

"Not that it matters," he put in hurriedly. "I am not curious, that I know of; but as I am going away for some time, and as, if anything happened to you (which, God forbid!),

there is not a soul to tell me anything, I think perhaps I ought to know what there is to know."

"That's true," she said; "I've thought that myself."

"But you don't *want* to tell me?" he said gently.

"I don't. It seems strange that a thing what everybody knows should never have come to *you*. Sometimes I've thought you guessed, an' that was why you didn't ast no questions."

"What was there to guess?" he cried in surprise. "You told me once that my father was a gentleman, and that you would tell me about him when I was older."

"I'd no business to ha' told that," she said stolidly.

"Haven't anybody ever said anything about me to you?"

"In what way do you mean?"

"I can tell they haven't," she said, "or you wouldn't ast *that*. My dear, you'd ha' knowed what ~~there~~ is to know a long time ago if it wasn't that it'll let me down a lot lower in your eyes than I'd ha' liked to be."

"That is not likely," said Lin quickly.

"No, but it will. I s'pose I've thought you'd get to know yourself, an' it wasn't a thing as *I* could make you see when you wus jest a lad; but everyone as knows me, dear, knows that I wus never married at all, although they knows, too, that you are my son."

Lin felt as if some one had struck him, yet he instantly knew himself for a fool in that he had not understood this before. If he said nothing now his silence was not unkindly meant; he simply could think of nothing to say.

"It do seem strange that you should ha' bin deceived," Annie went on sadly; "for I've never made no secret of it. I set myself to face the consequences o' this twenty years ago. I never hid nothing, nor deceived nobody."

"But," urged Lin, very gently, "you told me my father was a gentleman."

"Yes, an' I shouldn't ha' done, but you wus a child, an' I couldn't tell you anything then."

He gave a gesture of assent, and was silent. He was startled and terribly ashamed. For though he was young, he had started life early, and lately had seen a little of men and their ways, thus seeing a little, in a second-hand, reflected sort of way, of women and *their* ways; but he himself had remained much the same, ever leaning by instinct to that which was pure, to that which was physically and mentally and morally—*clean*. His fellow-clerks had laughed at him as "old-fashioned,"

but had liked him too, and somehow had never attempted to bring him "up to date."

"Mother," he said presently, "who *was* the man?"

She started, so lost in thought was she.

"Who, dear?" she asked stupidly.

"Yes! Who?" Lin's face was growing sterner. "A man may have a wife and child according to law, or a wife and child *not* according to law. In either case the child is *his*. The mere fact of his turning his back upon it can't make it less so, can it?"

"No!" she said quietly.

"Before God and his conscience he knows that, doesn't he?"

"Yes!" said she, quietly still.

"Tell me something of this man who was my father. Knowing you as I *know* you, I want to know how any man *dared* to do you such a ghastly wrong. You were always a trusting soul. He promised you—"

"Lin," she said, in hot haste, "he never did. God forgive him an' me, too. I was a foolish child, an' he wasn't much better, as a man's age goes."

"What age was he?"

"I scarcely *know*," she faltered; "p'r'aps as old as you—"

"Oh, then, he was *not* a child, 'even as a man's age goes.' He was a man, who knew what he was doing; that is, he ruined an innocent girl for his own devilish pleasure, and made her no amends. Well, that is how it seems to be to me. Perhaps I am wrong, and he *did* make amends. What did he do for you?"

Her face was white and her lips a-twitch.

"He had to go away," she said bravely.

"Did he come back?"

"No!"

"He went clean away and left you to face the consequences of his sin single-handed?"

"It was my sin, too."

"That may be; but *he* went away for good?"

"Yes!"

"Knowing everything?"

"No, he didn't know—nothing."

"But, but, when you knew, surely you wrote and told him?"

"No!"



Lin rose and stood leaning on the bed-rail, watching his mother earnestly.

"Why?"

"My dear, it doesn't matter—now."

"I think it does. When once we have closed this discussion I promise you never to reopen it; but now I want to know what sort of man this was. Why did you never write to him?"

"Because I didn't know where to find him."

Lin's hand, as it grasped the rail, shook like a leaf.

"I knew it!" he said. "He ruined you and got clear away. What was his name?"

"I—didn't—know."

"You don't know now?"

She wished most heartily that she could have said she did not.

"I've found out since by accident."

"But you have never heard from him?"

"Never. You see, I come right away from home here, an' if he'd gone back ever so, I should ha' bin none the wiser. He *may* have gone back, I can't say."

"I don't think you need trouble," Lin said, with a quiet sneer. "It is safe to presume that he never *did* go back. What made you come to London?"

"I come to try an' find him," she answered simply. "I had a portrait of him, with the name on it of the man what took it."

"And you came here with no other clue to him than that?"

"No other," she answered, with a dreary impatience of this inquisition; "an' *that* was no good."

Lin stood looking before him into vacancy. The blank misery, the shameful sin of the thing was dawning upon him slowly—a revelation of humanity's darker side from which he shrank, as anything young and hopeful well might.

"Good God!" he burst out suddenly.

"My dear!" said she, in loving reproof.

"Well, I say it in surprise, for I never thought that He could make a man quite as bad as that! I suppose, after all, there *is* a devil, and he had a hand in him!"

She rose quickly, ready even at that distance of time to stand up loyally in his defence. Whatever he might seem to others, he could never seem wholly bad to her.

"Lin, he wasn't what you think, an' I can't let you judge him. I've never done that, nor you mustn't neither. God made us all, an' some of us makes mistakes. I made one, an'

that wus one as most people would say stamped me as good for nothink. Would you stan' to hear *me* condemned by some one as didn't know me?"

"You know I wouldn't."

"Then I can't hear him condemned by some one as didn't know him. He'd never ha' hurt me for sheer cruelty; it wusn't in him, Lin, any more than it is in you."

"He turned his back upon you and slunk away!"

"Ah, you see," she said, fatally clinching the matter in her eagerness, "he believed I wus to be taken good care of—I wus to have married Jim Drake."

At this Lin's very physical powers forsook him. He put out his other hand, standing like one upon a cross, grasping the brass rail of the bed. White as a sheet he was with passion, and pain, and disgust. Annie looked at him in wonder.

"What's the matter?" she said. "You're ill. I'd no business to have told you this to-night. I ought to have known that you wusn't strong enough to stand it."

He resisted her efforts to draw him away from the bed, only shook his head, and avoided her pleading eyes.

"I wish you hadn't told me," he said at last. "It isn't pleasant hearing. Mother, did you think it *natural* for that man to leave you to the care of another man? You thought the better of him for his kind—consideration for you?"

She turned her back upon Lin, and did not speak. He laid a shaking hand upon her shoulder.

"Mother!"

She saw then what he meant, and burst into tears. With her own lips she had hopelessly condemned him!

"It was so just," said Lin bitterly, "so *manly* to the—*other man*! No, mother; your idol was a devil, and a coward, and a cur!"

"Lin, my Lin, I loved him!"

"That was a hideous puzzle—a sort of attraction to the opposite! That you, who must always have been good—"

"No; I wus no better than him. If I've ever got near to bein' better since, it wus becos' o' that love I had for him an' for you. I've tried to atone for the wrong I done, as much for his sake as my own. So," she went on firmly, "I've got to say to you—that I can't hear nothink agenst him, an' I won't. He brought me harm, an' he brought me good, too. He made me patient, an' forgivin', an' learnt me to show mercy to all things as I hope for mercy myself. I'm a better woman now than ever I'd ha' bin if I'd never ha' knowed him."

"No thanks to him," said Lin sternly; "and what about me? I shall think a lot of myself henceforth! It is comforting to reflect that one owes one's life to such a man as he! Am I anything like him?"

"A little," she said shiftily, "sometimes. Nobody'd notice that but me."

"If I am, I wonder you have not hated me! It would make me hate myself."

She turned, and going close to him, laid her face against his.

"My darlin', I loved you all the better for it. I've never harboured a hard thought of him; an' if I thought you did, it'd make me unhappy. For love o' me, if you can think me worth loving, you must promise me not to hate him."

"I'm not a saint, mother."

"No, dear; but you must forgive him like you've forgiven me."

"You! What connection is there? what comparison in your ideas of duty and his? You have been a slave to me! To talk of forgiving you is impertinence."

"You see," she urged earnestly, "it wus so diff'rent! There wus no comparison; you can't make it. I wus an ignorant country girl, an' he, as I told you, wus a gentleman."

"No, mother," interposed Lin sternly; "whatever else he may have been, to a dead certainty he was not *that*; or, if he were, then may I steer clear of gentlemen for the rest of my life!"

"There wus a great difference," she went on unheeding. "I've thought of it many a time. Say as he'd married me, why, I'd just ha' bin a fish out o' water; an', my dear, I should ha' ruined him worse than he ruined me."

"That is no excuse. The fact of his being what you say he was only proves his utter worthlessness. He was a man of good birth (truly there is a lot in *that*!), of education (there would seem to be a lot in that, too!), of cultivated tastes and sharpened sense of what is right and wrong. And yet all these advantages led him to nothing higher than the ruin of a child! His sense of gentlemanhood was so keen that it allowed him to leave you to face your ruined life, and to hide his share in it under the name of an innocent man. Oh, mother, I have lost something to-night that I shall never get back! I had no idea that civilised man could sink so low. And then, to think that I *belong* to him!"

Annie sobbed piteously.

"No, though," Lin went on thoughtfully, after a pause, "I do not belong to him. In the eyes of the law I have no father. For that I can be thankful!"

Moved by a sudden, pitying impulse, he bent his head and kissed his mother's white face. It was no part of his duty to stand aloof from her.

"I'll be content with you," he said gently, "for you have made up for him to me."

"My dear, I've tried. An' you must learn to forgive him too. For he wusn't what you thinks him, as some day you'll find out. He didn't *know*, or he'd ha' come back. An' besides, he left me some—some money."

"How much money?"

"Five pound. It was a great help to me; but for it I might ha' stopped an' married Jim. Thank God, it let me get away from *that*!"

"Five pounds!" said Lin wearily. In truth, he was weary, for weakness and agitation had mastered him. "Five pounds! Well, mother, some day we will send that money back with interest and—*thanks*. But until we can, I will do my best to forget what you have told me. For if I think about it I shall have to make you tell me that man's name, and perhaps it is better that I should not know it."

Annie kissed him, unclasped his hands from the bed-rail, and drew him over to a chair.

"I've done you a lot of harm," she said; "you shake like a leaf, an' you're as white as a ghost! You wusn't strong enough to bear it. You'll scarce be fit to go to-morrow."

He smiled at her anxious face, and went off into deep thought. He started up after a while, and began to pace the room.

"There is a name to be put on my belongings yet," he said, with a sudden return to his own manner. "Don't think I mean to be unkind, dear, for indeed I don't, but—I am going to start a name of my own. If I should stumble upon *his*, you can tell me, and I'll drop it."

"Why not mine, dear?" she said wistfully; "it's yours—you was christened by it. Are you ashamed of it?"

"No. But if you don't mind, I will start afresh with something quite different. Many professionals find it convenient to adopt names other than their own. I shall only be following their lead. On the day I left the Schools to go to Staniforth's there was a little chap died in the Infirmary. He was awfully fond of me. He hadn't a friend in the world, and

his name was Warrener. With your consent, mother, my name shall be Warrener, too."

She looked a trifle hurt and disappointed, but she offered Lin no opposition.

So the next day "Mr. Warrener" and his luggage went southward, and deep quiet settled down upon the house in Merryon Square.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### "IN A KINGDOM BY THE SEA"

As the summer passed, and then the autumn, Annie grew accustomed to the thought of the great distance between Lin and herself, and, growing accustomed, ceased to fret about it. He wrote regularly and hopefully, told her what he was doing and how he did it, nor ever failed to show, by means of kindly consideration and affectionate phrase, how closely she was connected with all his hopes and aspirations, and that in all his happy air-castles she had her own special apartment. She treasured his letters, reading them over and over, each time finding out something she had missed before, or understanding some little phrase which had hitherto puzzled her.

Concerning their conversation on the night before he left England, Lin was quite silent, nor could Annie find in any of his letters the faintest trace of his having remembered it. Sometimes she found herself doubting whether she had actually told him, or whether it was all a dream.

"There's one bit o' likeness between him an' me," she would say to herself, "he can keep a thing to hisself, if he says he will."

Just after Christmas she had a letter from the Italian city where Lin had for the present settled down to study under an old friend of the Professor's.

"A very happy Christmas," he wrote, "in spite of unfamiliar surroundings. A night or two before I had a delightful experience, which has made such an impression on me that I shall have to tell you about it. The three fellows who are staying in the same house with me came in full of news. They are all English, as I think I have told you, and very jolly at that; but the beggars don't work much, and they make a lot of fun of me for being in such dead earnest. You see, they don't *know*, and I don't see the necessity of telling them. Anyhow, they were full of spirits; they came and upset my shanty, put a cat and two kittens inside the piano, and kicked up a fearful

riot, all because there was to be a concert in aid of the English charities here, and our own Lindsay Le Quesne, passing through here on his way to London, had consented to break his journey North, and to give his services. This meant a crowd, and the prices went up to anything; but we made up our minds to ruin ourselves and pay, if it were only for standing-room. So we put on our overcoats, turned up our collars, and stood patiently stamping our feet in the cold. (Perhaps you think it can't be cold here, but that is a delusion.) Then we fought our way up the stairs, and getting seats, sat us down to shiver in a marble desolation. Now I have set your heart beating in double-quick time, but indeed there is no delicacy about me; I am thoroughly strong and well. The place was crammed, and the row—I mean enthusiasm—something tremendous. But the funniest thing out was that even the two titled lady-amateurs, and the other Britishers who had elected to distinguish themselves, elected to do so in Italian. We admired their pluck, and marvelled at it, but it left the success of the whole thing to some one who came on about midway down the programme. I had never heard Mr. Le Quesne sing. I expected a great deal, but, by George, I was not disappointed. I don't know that it was his voice altogether, but he himself did thoroughly fascinate me! After all the 'natives,' with their endless bowing, gesticulating, and fire-working; after the distinguished amateurs, with their imitation of the aforesaid, and their remarkable mixture of nervousness and foolhardiness, *his* graceful presence, and his pure, unaffected voice came like a breath of *home*. One might not have thought much of it in London, but here, where everything is so strange and un-English, it was simply electrifying! A bit of a slenderly-built Englishman, he seemed to us to embody all that is best in manhood and in nationality. With everything showy open to him, he yet chose a simple English song; and if I were to try to tell you the effect it had upon everyone, I should make a fool of myself. As long as I live I shall remember those opening words, sung in that most impressive of silences—the silence of a listening crowd—

“ ‘It was many and many a year ago, in a kingdom by the sea.’ ”

“I held my breath, while something like a cold shiver ran through my hair and down my backbone. O'Brien—an Irishman, and a bit of a devil, but a real good sort at bottom—turned as white as a sheet, and sat like a figure of stone.

Harvey—a bit of a dandy, who makes a point of sneering at everything—suddenly lost something on the floor, and bent down ever so long looking for it. Otway screwed up his eye-glass, and glared at the great chandelier. But the feeling in each one of us was the same. If we had never known ourselves before for the sons of that 'kingdom by the sea,' never felt what it was to be passionately proud of it, we knew now, and it was worth while being enlightened. We all, so to speak, wrapped ourselves in our Union Jack, and looked down on every man who was not a Britisher! But British, or Italian, or French, or what not, everybody present *felt* that voice of our great singer's, and made no secret of such feeling. Not that *he* could have wanted telling, though, for he knew—knew that he held that vast crowd in front of him just as easily, just as sensitively, as a boy holds a flying kite. And the voice itself is perfect, as soft as velvet, and as clear as a silver bell, never missing a word, or slurring one over, or sacrificing truth to mere effect. It was a lesson in sincerity as well as in singing. Even the idiots who sometimes spoil a thing by applauding between the verses were silent, shut up by the marvellous echo of the last word. When he began again—

" 'She was a child and I was a child, in our kingdom by the sea ;  
And we loved with a love that was more than love, I and my Annabel  
Lee'—

I saw the tears drop down on O'Brien's coat-collar, and I was not surprised, for I could have cried myself. O'Brien told me afterwards that it took him back among the misty green hills at home, back to the days when a little Irish girl had loved him, and made him, as he said, unconsciously quoting David Copperfield, 'more fit for Heaven than ever he had been since !'

"Well, I sat that song out, listening as I have never listened before, and as I never expect to listen again. It was a revelation to me of much in myself and others of the existence of which I had not known. It was finished as perfectly as it had been begun. The trick of using a high note at the end for the sake of effect the singer disdained ; his voice dropped down and died away quite naturally.

"And what a tumult there was ! He responded with the little 'Donna é Mobile,' known to you as 'Fair shines the moon to-night,' and then he was gone, taking every scrap of intelligence we fellows had away with him. With one accord,



all the British youth in the city (students and loungers alike) took leave of sense and delivered itself over to enthusiasm:

"We learned that Mr. Le Quesne was to leave by the midnight train, so we all marched to the station, waited for him, and gave him three British cheers loud enough to deafen him. I know my throat ached and my ears rang for an hour!

"He had but a minute or so, and seemed completely taken by surprise; but he stood at the carriage window bare-headed, shouted us 'A Happy Christmas,' said he heartily wished he were a youngster again and one of us, and that the sound of our British voices would echo gratefully in his ears all the way—he was going to say 'home,' but pulled himself up and substituted 'to London.'

"Those of our number who were near enough got a hearty shake of the hand. I had one, and I was proud of it.

"When we had all had time to cool down, I think we felt a bit ashamed of the exhibition we had made of ourselves; but it was a memorable occasion, and I am sure Lindsay Le Quesne is a brick! By the way, I like to know that you understand my ravings, and you may not recognise his name by seeing it; but you used to hear us talk of him as 'Lindsay Le Quain.'"

She sprang to her feet with a cry, and the sheets of thin paper fluttered to the ground. The thing she had hoped for, prayed for, dreading it all the while, had happened! Lin and *he* had met, had looked in each other's eyes, had grasped each other by the hand in all kindness—in something more than charity!

Annie smiled as she thought of the white-faced lad who, standing that night by the rail of his bed, had burst out brokenly:

"Did God ever make a man *quite* as bad as that?"

And now? She took Lin's happy letter, and resumed her reading, quite sure that all was right.

"I nearly ruined things with my muddlin'," she said. "Thank God, I kep' his name to myself. It's all comin' round. I can just stan' by an' see a surer Hand than mine bring them two together. They'll know each other without any help o' mine, an' Lin will find out for hisself that what I says is true. There's a lot o' good in him—oh, a lot o' good!—as there is in us all. Yes, he must find that out for hisself, an' the rest 'll follow. If he knowed that name first, it would spoil everything, for somehow I think as Lin is slow to forgive. All them four years in that office he didn't forgive *me*!"

## CHAPTER XXIX

### "GIVING PLACE UNTO THE NEW"

ONE evening, late in the following summer, Annie stood on the platform of Charing Cross Station waiting for the train which was bringing Lin home. While she waited, joyful expectation was so mingled with shyness and dread that she had much to do to keep from crying.

Lin's later letters were largely to blame for this. In spite of their frank affection, there was in them a certain tone of self-reliance, of "emancipation," that told his mother he was coming home full of his own future, which was to be spent in his own way. This seemed to take him beyond her—to leave her in the background. Also, his letters had altered in another way, that she could feel, but could not quite explain. She saw that Lin had found his level among congenial people, and was beginning to understand his own value, which, from his point of view, was entirely satisfactory, but from hers, a trifle humiliating.

"He's Mr. Warrenner now," she said to herself, as she stood on that busy platform, "an', by the way he writes, he feels pretty certain of doin' well. I must expect to find him altered, an' I mustn't be down-hearted if he is."

But as that train steamed in she could not see it for tears, and the scurrying mass of people were but one misty blot, which she had not reduced to order when she felt her face flattened against Lin's shoulder, and knew that her prim little bonnet was all awry.

At any rate, she thought she, his happy laugh was quite unaltered, and—yes, so were his eyes. Having settled which, she permitted herself to be placed against a lamp-post.

"You stay there," said Lin, "while I look up my traps."

The traps were found, and Annie, with her heart in her eyes and an unusual flush on her cheeks, watched the owner of the said traps as he shook hands with three other fellows, who were evidently chaffing him as they glanced in her direction.

"What do you think?" said Lin, as he rejoined her and put

his arm through hers. "The beggars refused to believe that you were my mother. I had no end of a bother to stop O'Brien from coming to find out for himself. I shouldn't have tried, but I knew three strange fellows would have frightened you out of your wits."

"Why didn't they believe it, dear?" said she, sensitively afraid of not looking good enough.

"They said you were a lot too pretty, and ever so much too young."

She shook her head at him in reproof, thinking what a good-looking, gentlemanly fellow he was, and how like, how *very* like to some one else.

"How is the dear old man? You said you were afraid I should see a difference in him."

"Yes, he is gettin' feeble, he calls it lazy; but his mind's quite clear. He's bin so afraid that you wasn't livin' as you ought to live, for want o' money."

"On the contrary, I have a very respectable remnant of my 'legacy' left. Money goes farther over there than it does here. Oh, you quiet, stay-at-home small person, won't I take you about if I ever manage to earn anything decent! Now, here we are; we shall have to put up with a 'growler,' because of the luggage."

Mr. Holt stood on the top of the steps of No. 19, and commenced to wave his big silk handkerchief as soon as the "growler" came in sight.

"Here you are!" cried he, as Lin sprang out, "here you are at last! Why, good gracious! Why, dear me! dear me! you've grown like any boy at school! Eh? The effect of the Italian air, is it? What a pity I didn't go to Italy in *my* youth! It might have made *me* grow! Where's your mother? Oh, here she is! Well, now you've got him home again, what do you think of him? Looks delicate, doesn't he? Looks consumptive or asthmatical, or something of that sort, no doubt. Dear me, what a state she has been in because she has been sure that the country where organ-grinders grow wild would not agree with you! She's heard that they eat nothing but onions, and drink nothing but olive oil, and she was sure you wouldn't do either to save your life! And he's grown a moustache, too! That's for the girls, Emma," with a wicked little wink. "Depend upon it, he grew that for the benefit of the girls. Well, well, we're only young once, and we've got to make the best of it."

Whereupon, having shaken Lin's hands until his fat little

shoulders ached, and he was quite out of breath, he toddled into the dining-room and sank into a chair, telling Lin solemnly that it was his intention to lose no time in consulting a specialist on the subject of his own premature decay.

Lin laughed again, and hoped in all sincerity that he might live to be a hundred!

That mention of "girls" was quite enough to set Annie's heart beating in dread.

"That would be the next trouble," she thought; "Lin was nearly twenty-three!"

She soon saw, however, that Lin's head was not running upon engagements of the matrimonial order, but upon engagements of quite a different sort.

He had come home full of health and vigour, ready to take his place in the ranks, and to shoulder his way as near to the front as his natural gifts and their newly-acquired cultivation would let him.

The day after his return he reported himself to the Professor, who personally presented him to several people likely to be of service. As a result of which, Lin was fairly started in the ranks of professional singers, and having obtained a public hearing, was passed up as one who was likely to get on.

If Annie had looked forward to his being home for long, she soon had to abandon any such idea. Barely a fortnight had passed when a telegram summoned him to his agents, and when he returned to Merryon Square it was to announce that his "traps" must be packed for a longish journey on the morrow.

"I'm off on a nine weeks' tour through the provinces," said he jubilantly. "Really a stroke of luck! With a real live prima-donna and a first-class concert party. 'Madame's' tenor has broken down. I'm sorry for him, but I hope he will remember the old proverb about the ill wind. Madame herself was in Bond Street, and interviewed me. She's a funny little Austrian, with heavenly eyes and a dark moustache. She called me 'Vorreener,' and said my voice was 'Ah, so moche too nice!' I thought at first she meant it sarcastically, but she didn't—she was guileless. I shall adore Madame, I know I shall."

"Isn't she married?" asked Annie faintly.

"Yes, to a Frenchman. Berton tells me that Madame never takes him on tour, though; he stays behind to attend to her domestic menagerie and the conservatories."

"How old is she?"

Lin burst out laughing.

"Older than you are, mother mine. She has a daughter nearly twenty, who travels with us as solo violin."

"What is *she* like?" asked Annie, in despair. Of course, the daughter was a certainty!

"I don't know. But when I get away I will forward you my impressions of everybody and everything."

He forwarded his impressions, which seemed to his mother to be much too favourable, as indeed they were, to be deep. Everything was rose-coloured to Lin just then, and Annie soon grew accustomed to his extravagantly happy letters. Also she grew to regard them as frivolous, and began to fear that he was in the hands of the Philistines, who must perforce corrupt him. Her narrow education and narrower experience had cramped her sympathies, in all save one direction. But for *that* she might have developed into one of those objectionable people who are firstly-religious, lastly-religious, intermediately-religious, and most *un*-Christian. But the thought of that man who was a sinner, the intense love for him which all those years had not destroyed in her, the firm belief that he must yet be something to her, and she something to him, the burning desire to atone for his sin with her own—this humanised her, made her merciful, and tolerant of many things which she would otherwise have felt it her duty to condemn. Even now she felt that it must be scarcely less than sinful to pass one's life in ministering to the mere amusement of other people. To her a theatre was a bad place. Concert-going might be a shade or two ahead of theatre-going, but for life to be *all* concert-going was surely wrong. If Lin were wrong, then was it clearly her duty to warn him. She straightway sat down and wrote him her fears on the subject.

Lin's answer was temperate to a degree.

"I am sorry this is a trouble to you," he wrote, "but I understand how you feel about it. Yes, we do professedly devote ourselves to other people's amusement, and, as long as people demand to be amused, so long should it be the study of somebody to provide amusement of the kind which shall lift them up instead of letting them down. Besides, music is something better than an amusement to those who love her. I wish you would try to set aside your prejudice, and to look at the thing fairly. Would you banish music from the churches? Of course not. Then why should music be all that is good in a church, and all that is bad in a concert-room? No; I know. You have the 'pleasure' of the thing on your

brain, the absence of the element of 'work.' I spend my days in idleness. Now, how shall I make you see that I don't do anything of the kind? that my heart is in my profession, and that in consequence I am working quite as earnestly as, and far more conscientiously than, I have ever worked in an office? Better by far a contented singer than an unhappy clerk. You say you fear that an idle, pleasure-loving, pleasure-seeking life must ruin one, must make one think that the world was made for one, and so in time must deaden all sense of responsibility towards one's fellow-creatures. A man must not necessarily be said to lead such a life as you describe, simply because he follows a calling congenial to him, and is thereby rendered happy. Indeed, it seems to me that he must be a poor creature whom happiness does not make more human, more sympathetic, more desirous of doing some little good when he can. Surely happiness ought to make us better, and not worse. Somehow I can't think that goodness is the outcome of misery.

"And now, concerning the people with whom I am associated. It is downright comical to find you condemning people without knowing them. It is so absurdly unlike you! Who taught me to look for good in everybody, however unpromising? You did. It is a fine religion, this of yours, and it is astonishing to find you running away from it. If you knew my fellow-travellers, no one would more cheerfully acknowledge their actual worth than you. They are very much the same as the rest of us, neither all good nor all bad, neither very saintly nor very sinful—for the most part generous, unassuming, anxious to please, grateful for appreciation, certainly not selfish, and always more ready to say a kind word and do a kind action than they are to say a harsh word or to do an unkind action. You condemn them for want of knowledge. As I am one of them now, please extend to them your ever-ready charity of opinion. There is one thing: however severe you may be to the crowd, one has only to reduce the crowd to single individuals, and never had individual sinfulness so merciful a judge! Do you think I have forgotten how you once pleaded with me for one who seemed to me to be outside humanity, who seems to me to be so still? Don't think I do not think of it because I have not spoken of it. I try to put it away from me as far as I can, but in spite of me it comes in front of me oftener than I like. Here I am much less charitable than you are. For the more I see of the world, and of the men and women in it, the less excuse I can find for a man who commits

the one crime which the law of this country suffers him to commit with impunity. I think of it in this way, I think of it in that, I try to find some shadow of excuse for it, I try to soften it down, to think it less horrible; but I never, never succeed. The man who could do a thing like that must be morally deficient, or mentally weak, as are the men who take other men's lives, or contentedly fatten upon other men's substance. There must be an absence of understanding—somewhere. And now I am condemning myself, for, if this is so, then surely ought one to say, 'God forgive him, for he knows not what he does!' But I do feel that such a man must carry about him some distinguishing mark by which all right-thinking men shall know him for something to be shunned. I feel that if I were ever to meet *that* man, sheer instinct would lead me to recognise and so to avoid him. May I never meet him! As to the forgiveness for which you plead so hardly, I think you only want to consider the matter fairly to see that forgiveness is out of the question. Apart from all bitterness, speaking calmly, I say that there are injuries which do not admit of forgiveness. The only thing one can do is to try to forget them."

He came back from his provincial tour just the same as ever. Even Madame's charming daughter had failed to lead him captive, or, to be quite correct, had not tried, she being as much absorbed in her own affairs as was he in his. As time went on, Annie ceased to lose her breath when Lin mentioned a lady's name, just as he ceased to feel that his very life depended upon some important criticism of his share in a programme. He grew used to all degrees of praise, save its superlative, which he modestly thought to be beyond him. But neither had he ever to fear the adverse extreme, from which he was as far removed. Everything intermediate he weathered successfully, and at last, feeling pretty sure of a friendly audience, thought he might let the dreaded *critiques* pass.

Safely launched on the tide of popularity, Lin came and went, making Merryon Square his headquarters, and feeling now no hesitation in doing so. The old man was so devoted to him, so proud of his success, and of having had so large a share in bringing it about, that for Lin to have lived elsewhere would have meant just that sort of ingratitude of which he was incapable.

The old friends from Brixton came up occasionally, though

not often, for there were little new friends now who could not come too, and who would have objected to stay at home.

During these occasional visits Annie would sit working in silence, while Mr. Hoskins and Lin talked "shop" by the hour, ever listening, as she worked, for the mention of a name, which, somehow, was never spoken in her hearing. Perhaps Lin had enough to do to attend to his own affairs. Even the thought of the giants of his profession failed to awe him now. Familiarity was breeding a pleasant sensation of growing acquaintanceship. Annie once or twice nerved herself to ask a question, but her dread of Lin connecting that question with the story of his own parentage effectually held her back, and thus the name, though it rose to her lips, remained unspoken. If Lin looked at her, she thought, she would infallibly betray herself. So she stealthily searched the papers, finding there many names with which she had become familiar, but *his* name—never. This puzzled her. She made up her mind to watch for an opportunity, and to ask where the famous singer was, but was saved the trouble by Lin himself, who suddenly looked up one night from the paper he was reading with an excited shout of:

"By George, he's here! He's singing for the Cancer Hospital, and I shall meet him!"

"Who, dear?" said Annie, stooping to pick up something she had dropped.

"Lindsay Le Quesne. Now, mother, here's your chance. If you never go to another concert, you will go to this. I am determined that you shall hear him. You will never believe in me again, but I will put up with that, just to show you what a tenor voice *can* be."

"Where have he been all this time?" she asked indifferently. "You've been home two years, or near it, an' I never hear you say nothing about him."

"Well, there has been a great deal said," Lin answered thoughtfully, "which, as it was but rumour, I did not care to repeat. The whole of his engagements for last year were cancelled on account of ill-health. It led unscrupulous people to insinuate that he had lost his voice, and would never sing again."

"That isn't true," she said, "or he would not be goin' to sing now."

"Of course, it is not true. I never thought it was. I can quite understand that he would not care to risk his reputation by singing when he was not up to the mark. A really great



artist cannot afford to do that. I see here that this is his only appearance this season, so go you must."

"When is this concert?"

"Oh, not for six weeks yet, the 3rd of February, I think. Now, don't say you won't go, because you will, and there is an end of it."

"I haven't said I wouldn't go," she said slowly, "for if everything goes well, I *will* go, jest to hear your—your—Mr.—Le Quesne."

And then as Lin looked up at her with a pleased smile, she turned and left the room, for suddenly and vividly, like any girl of seventeen, she had blushed to the roots of her hair.

As the date of that concert drew nearer she lost more and more of her self-possession, until the thought of it was a nightmare. To "have to go" anywhere was always somewhat of a trial to her quiet, retiring disposition, and the thought of the crowded hall, the idea of sitting as one of the crowd to see the man who had dominated her whole life, but to whom she was less than nothing, so preyed upon her that it made her ill.

"I'll have to tell Lin I *can't* go," she thought, on the night of the 2nd of February; "for I can't, it's no good. The thought of it have made me bad. I'll leave it to near the last hour, and then I'll tell him I'm not well, and that I can't go."

But Lin was not to be "done." He only laughed.

"Mother," he said, "I am quite prepared for that awful announcement, but I am going to be brutal. I am going to insist. I know all about your nerves, and after to-night I will be at their mercy. But for this once I am not going to give into them. You shall get into a cab at your own door, you shall get out at the door of the hall. I will see you into your seat, and I will come and fetch you out of it. But if I have to carry you, you shall go."

She had to give in.

How she controlled herself sufficiently to sit quietly in that cab, to let Lin help her out and pilot her through a crowd of laughing, chattering people to her seat, to take possession of it and smile as Lin nodded and left her, she never knew. It seemed to her that through all the heavy demands life had made upon her powers of endurance, they had never responded so feebly as now. Her heart beat fast and heavily, her head was going round. She closed her dim eyes and leaned back in her chair. A ceaseless chatter was going on about her, which would have amused her had she been able to listen to it. Even Lin's professional name, spoken by a girl behind her, only

moved her with a dim sense of familiarity. She did not feel curious as to what they might have to say about him. But as the later comers surrounded her she began to feel sheltered and to recover herself, to venture to raise her eyes and look about her, to look at the occupants of the crowded gallery through her opera-glasses, as her neighbours were doing. She dropped the glasses in her lap with a start, as a burst of applause greeted the appearance of two distinguished instrumentalists, who came forward to open with a duet for piano and violin. Annie found this duet dull and uninteresting, just a continuous ripple of meaningless sound; but the next item, a song by a well-known baritone, she thought very nice. She even felt sorry that Lin's voice was not strong and deep like that; your sonorous baritone or bass can usually command the admiration of the crowd. After that came a lady, who moved Annie to genuine wonder that a voice could be made to do so much and say so little. Still, the lady was much applauded, and only by dint of determination escaped having to sing again. Then came Lin, quite at home and in excellent voice. A faultlessly got-up young man on Annie's right at once undertook to enlighten two girls of his party as to Mr. Warrener's private affairs.

"He's an awfully decent chap, you know—friend of mine knows him well. Yes, he's one of *the* Warreners—well-connected, and all that. You can see he's a gentleman at a glance—there's never any chance of making a mistake about *that*, is there?"

"Oh, *never*," responded one of the girls severely.

"He's awfully good-looking," said the other, with enthusiasm.

"Think so? Well, it's a rum thing, but he's got a downright striking look about him of the other tenor chap—Le Quesne, you know. They say he fancies himself on the strength of it—wears his hair and moustache in the same way, cultivates the same mannerisms, and all that."

"Is not that rather foolish?" asked the severe young lady. "Such a challenge to comparison."

"Y-es. But he'll never be Le Quesne, you know—hasn't the quality nor the power either."

"How long before he comes on? I'm dying to hear him."

"Oh, some way down. Beastly long show, isn't it? These charitable concerns always are."

Here an indignant would-be listener turned and stared at the chattering trio, with the effect of producing temporary silence.

The next two items over, Annie clutched her opera-glasses

and sat upright. All about her was an air of expectant excitement, and the well-informed young man on her right had burst forth afresh with reliable information concerning Mr. Le Quesne.

"He's the deuce an' all of a bad lot, you know. He was going to marry Helen Le Breton, but all in a hurry she found out that he had a wife living apart from him in some American watering-place. I know a chap who has seen her. Le Quesne never denied it. He was awfully gone on Le Breton, and she on him. They say it jolly near killed her. Come along, now. Where is he? Hallo! here he is."

"It is not he," said the severe young lady breathlessly. "It is Mr. Warrenner."

"Didn't I tell ou he was like him? No, by Jove, it is Warrenner. Le Quesne's not turned up."

Annie took her hand from her eyes and looked up. There stood Lin, in the midst of a hubbub of disappointed excitement, patiently waiting to speak.

He did so with pardonable nervousness. He had been desired by Mr. Le Quesne to say that, owing to indisposition and a throat affection induced by sudden change of climate, he felt unequal to singing "The Requital," for which he was down on the programme. Rather than disappoint, he would sing, but it would be at great personal inconvenience, and he claimed the indulgence which a generous public would not fail to extend to an old servant who had never had occasion to ask it until now.

The cheering was loud and long. Lin retired, and in another minute Mr. Le Quesne came on, outwardly self-possessed, but, as those who were near him saw, very pale, with the curious yellowish pallor of deep-seated physical trouble. From out of the roar which greeted him, Annie heard a voice behind her say triumphantly:

"What did I tell you? Barnes bet me a fiver yesterday that Le Quesne never sang another song! He's been in the hands of the German specialists for the last six months, and Helston, his own doctor here—"

The voice abruptly ceased as Le Quesne began his song.

Annie sat with her white lips tight set, and her opera-glasses upheld. They were good glasses, and placed every line of the singer's face at her mercy.

What was his voice to her? She was incapable of judging whether it were good or bad, but his face had been with her day and night for five-and-twenty years, or rather the face of a

man whom she supposed was—he. Once and for ever let any doubt concerning his identity be set at rest. Of a surety here was the man. Something surged over her like a great wave of passionate resentment and of impotent revolt. Oh, time! oh, pitiless, insatiable time! which had so altered him! He had stood still with her, surrounded by the glamour of his gracious youth. She had had but to close her eyes, and lo! he was before her, with his lithe length of shapely limb, his wavy brown head, his sunburnt face and clear eyes, and laughing, low-toned voice. And now? Oh, this was *not* he! He had walked away in the low red sunlight of a summer evening years and years ago, to be seen of the girl who loved him never more!

"He, as I knowed him, is quite dead," thought Annie Deane, as she watched his ghost with hungry eyes, "an' I, as he knowed me, am dead too. We're old, that's all. My Lin's more like him now than he is like himself."

She laid the opera-glasses quietly on her knees. He was going off; there was a roar of sound the whole house through. Those who were at the back stood up. Annie heard loud cries, and hand-clappings, and the usual beating of sticks and umbrellas; she saw hats and handkerchiefs wave; she watched him come back to the platform five times, the last time shaking his head with a weary, unmirthful smile. He stood one moment at the top of the stairs leading from the platform, slowly shook his head again, bowed yet once more, then finally disappeared. The clamour in front continued until some one came forward and announced that Mr. Le Quesne had left the hall. In the lull which followed, Annie heard the girls on her right declaring that they did not remember ever having been so disappointed in a singer before.

"It is difficult to believe that he can ever have been so very wonderful," said the severe one languidly. "There is nothing at all in his voice now, as far as my judgment goes."

"Well, there *was*," the knowing young man said ruefully. "Ask anybody who has heard him! Of course, there's no use denying it, he's simply gone all to pieces!"

"He looked very ill," the younger girl said gently. "It was good of him to sing, but I think he made a mistake, and did himself injustice."

As he made his final bow to his generous audience, Lindsay Le Quesne thought the same thing. Well, it was a mistake made in a good cause, and had involved a sacrifice of self as bitter as it was complete.

"I will sing for you if possible," he had said, two months

before, and he had kept his word, trusting perhaps too blindly in the perfect gift which had been his so long. More than once, quite recently, he had sung, feeling ill and by no means sure of himself, and yet had shaken himself free and had made his mark. But to-night he had made a mistake, the full significance of which he might not stop to analyse at present. Now, he had but one desire—to get away and be alone. That, and the natural instinct which forbids a man to show by as much as a shrink or a quiver that he has *lost*, kept him outwardly self-possessed; but he made no attempt to console himself with any comfortable lie. Truth—grim, ghastly, pitiless—loomed darkly between him and that applauding crowd; truth—grim, ghastly, pitiless—followed him down the stairs, prepared to follow him henceforth whithersoever he might go. Hitherto he had refused to look truth in the face; he knew now that he might refuse no longer. He must get accustomed to her stern features, must make friends with them—must learn to smile at them as a brave man should. Well, given breathing time, he knew himself to be not quite deficient in pluck. Life, even with him, had not been all success. He lingered half a minute to listen to the roar behind him. When once he had passed out of earshot, that, too, would be among the things that were done with.

He was sorely tempted to turn back and look at the kindly crowd once more just for gratitude and old friendship's sake, but he shrugged his shoulders and turned on his heel. Good-byes are not so pleasant that one need prolong them. Better to cut them short and go. Once out in the dark street—once up his own stairs, into his quiet room, there would be no necessity for the smile which was a lie.

He stepped down into the passage leading to the artists' rooms. But for having to get his coat, he reflected, he might have got away without encountering any one. As he stood hesitating, some one who had been standing in the shadow of the staircase came forward.

"I have your coat here," said Lin Warrener. "I thought you were not up to standing about talking to people. You ought to get out of these draughts as quickly as possible."

He turned and looked at the speaker in ill-concealed annoyance. He wanted no sympathy, spoken or implied. But Lin's face, like his voice, exhibited none. It was quite unemotional, not to say expressionless. And yet something in it attracted, then riveted, Le Quesne's attention.

"Thank you," he said. "I shall be glad to get away. Let

me see—I think it was you who apologised for me? Again—thank you."

Lin assisted him with his coat in silence.

"Have you finished?"

"No. I have another song; not yet, though."

"A long programme to-night."

"Very. I suppose you have a cab or carriage waiting? Shall I see?"

"No, I am walking. The night is fine, and my place not two minutes' walk from here."

He stood, fastening his collar as he spoke, and looking at Lin attentively.

"Do I know you?" he said. "Your face strikes a chord in my memory somewhere."

"Perhaps I can tell you how. I will get my coat and walk up with you if I may—unless, of course, you would rather be alone."

Five minutes before he would rather have been alone, but now he said:

"I am not so anxious for my own society. Come with me, if you like."

Lin went.

"I can steal half an hour," he said cheerily, as he joined Le Quesne in the street. "Now, let me account for you knowing my face. Do you remember a noisy crowd of temporarily-exiled Britons who once assembled at a station to have the honour of wishing you God-speed?"

"What, in Italy—three—four years ago?"

"Yes."

"Indeed, I do remember! It is just one of those things a man is pleased to remember. So you were one of that happy crowd. What good times you must have had over there!"

"Yes. But, you see, it takes so little to make one happy at one-and-twenty. Your 'Annabel Lee,' for instance, has been a delightful memory ever since."

"Thank you once more; I am glad you heard me sing before to-night, because you might have been persuaded that reputations are made easily, whereas it is the other way about."

"I hope I keep that fact well in mind," Lin said, with a laugh. "About your singing to-night—you were not well, as everyone knew, and an artist is not a machine that he should 'go' just because it is time to set him in motion."

"Ah, but he should be! An uncertain reputation is worse than a bad one."



"That can't be a reliable opinion, coming from you, who have never had either."

"I am afraid you are too sharp for me. So you are sure I have not met you more than once?"

"Quite sure."

"How long have you been singing?"

"Rather more than two years."

"I did not hear your song, but I heard its reception. Judging by that, you sing well."

"Nothing startling," said Lin cheerfully. "I shall never be among the stars, so it is best to make up my mind to it."

"We have only your word for that; and, even if you are right, I don't know that you need regret it much; for, if you fail to get very high, you won't have so far to fall—when your time comes."

There was no bitterness in the words, but Lin winced, and said nothing in answer. As they passed a brilliantly-lighted public-house, he felt he was being watched.

"I can't quite make this out," Le Quesne said, when they had passed again into shadow. "I don't pretend to anything remarkable in the way of remembering faces; I have seen too many, and I am sure I should not remember yours had I only met you once in a crowd. I must have known somebody like you."

"Very likely," said Lin, as they crossed the road.

"Here we are, and there is a strong light in my rooms, which means that my friend Helston is waiting to pitch into me for disobeying his orders. I shall have to own that I was wrong, and that he was right. I hate being pitched into—come in and act as a buffer?"

"I wish I might, but I must be getting back."

"Ah, I forgot. Well, you know where I live. Come and see me! Let me think, though. I believe they are getting up a conspiracy to prevent me from talking, so I must not ask you to martyrise yourself. Do you play cards or billiards?"

"Both very badly."

"Then I am afraid I cannot offer you anything in the way of entertainment. Still, I should like to hear you sing." Saying which, he held out his hand. "Will you give me a look?"

"I should like to—immensely."

"Then by all means do. Come in presently when you have finished."

"I would, but I am on domestic duty. I have to see my mother home. She won't leave her seat until I go for her."

Le Quesne turned round on the step, feeling in his pocket for his latch-key.

"Sure it *is* your mother?" said he drily.

"As sure as a man *can* be," was the answer, at which Le Quesne laughed, and Lin turned back towards the hall, the echo of that laugh jarring painfully upon him as he went. For himself, he was in no laughing humour, being steeped to the lips in a humiliation that was not his own.

"It is no business of mine," he told himself miserably, "and I wouldn't have let him see that I felt it for the world! But I'd have given my head rather than he should have sung. He need not have sung. His name had filled the place, and the funds would not have suffered. By George! *he* suffered. I couldn't have stood there and smiled at defeat as he did. He bore it like a brick, and never made a sign. I wonder what he will feel like when he is left alone to-night. I should feel like putting a bullet into my head. For he has had his day. He is done for, and he knows it. I wish I had not to go on again. He has taken all the pluck out of me for to-night."



## CHAPTER XXX

### "MY MOTHER—MR. LE QUESNE"

"SHALL we walk or ride nome?" asked Lin of his mother, when it was all over.

"I'd rather walk, dear—please."

"It's a longish walk, and it is late."

"Just as you like, only I'm tired of sitting."

Which was but half a truth ; the whole being that she was athirst for information, and was relying upon the walk home to give it her. Lin, however, was extremely quiet. He did not refer to the concert at all—did not even ask if she had enjoyed it. This told her there was something wrong. At last she could bear the silence no longer. If Lin did not mean to say anything about the man he had expressly taken her to hear, why, she must. She could not eat her heart out in unbearable suspense.

"How wus it that *you* come on to say that to-night, dear?"

"Oh, it was in this way : Both conductors shirked it. One because he has very little English, and would have made a fearful hash of saying anything ; the other because he is as nervous as a girl, and when he is flurried always stammers. They wrangled behind in a way so comical that I was enjoying it until I happened to look at Mr. Le Quesne. He was evidently too ill to be kept waiting about while they settled matters at their leisure. I—rather impertinently, I am afraid—went to his rescue."

"What is the matter with him?"

"I don't know."

"Much, would you think?"

"I really could not say."

"But you talked to him?"

"Yes. I walked as far as his house with him, and promised to call."

She drew away from Lin's arm, and clenched her impatient hands in the folds of her dress. The announcement was such a startling one, and Lin made it in such a matter-of-fact way.

Judging by his manner, he might have been calling upon Mr. Le Quesne all his life.

"What made you do that?"

"Because he asked me."

She gave a quick, sharp sigh. If only she dared have stopped and have cried, "Tell me every word that man said to you, and every word you said to him, or I shall go mad," she would have done it, for it seemed to her that Lin was answering her shortly for the purpose. But she restrained herself. He could not have any suspicion yet, and if she asked too many questions he would surely begin to wonder.

"I heard a lot o' people just round me talkin' about him," she said presently.

"Yes, they always do. They know more about every public man than he knows about himself."

"They wus sayin' he had a wife in America."

"Well, *that* he may have. I don't know. After all my ravings about his voice, I am afraid you were disappointed."

"I don't understand voices," she said, with irritation, "you know I don't. It's no use astin' *me* about singin'. The people next me was disappointed; they said so."

"Did they suppose he wanted to disappoint them? Do they think their disappointment matched his? It is easy enough to find fault with an artist who lets his good-nature run away with his judgment, but it is not very kind."

"I don't think they meant it unkind," she said, and they walked on in silence again until they were near home.

"You'll call an' see how he is, won't you?" she ventured then.

"Oh, certainly!"

"When? To-morrow?"

"If I have time."

"I'd make time. It'll look bad if you don't go soon."

She ascended the steps as she spoke, passed into the house in front of Lin, then went straight up to her own room. As she turned up the gas and caught sight of herself she started. Her cheeks were scarlet, and her large-pupiled eyes brilliant with inward fire. She dared not face her son like that. She sent word by her little maid, who had stayed up to attend to Mr. Holt, that she could not come down to supper—that she was very tired.

But she only loosed her heavy hair and walked up and down her room, muttering excitedly to herself:

"There's something wrong with him—something that's cruel bad. I can tell that by Lin's manner. He won't say no more

than he can help; he doesn't when anything's touched him deep. He's that fond of him! he fired up about them people bein' disappointed as if it had been hisself! Can it ever be *true* that they two are gettin' friendly? Oh, what will I do if they do? An' what will I do if they *don't*? Either way it'll drive me mad."

When Lin went to bed that night it was with the fixed intention of calling at Mr. Le Quesne's rooms the next day. But somehow the next day things appeared in such a different light that he could scarcely believe his impressions of the previous night reliable. It all seemed so improbable. Le Quesne the familiar became again Le Quesne the unapproachable, hedged about by the formidable barrier of his own greatness.

"What was it all but a mistake?" thought Lin. "He was ill and down in the mouth, as a man *is* when he is queer. I *had* a cheek to offer to go home with him! I wish I hadn't—now. I shan't call. He is somebody in the world, and lives in an uncommonly swell part of it. I am—nobody, and have no right even to leave a card at his door with a name upon it which is not mine. If he remembers me, he can easily find me out."

It happened that as Lin went up Oxford Street that day he met Cliffe Hayter, the baritone whose voice had made such an impression upon Annie. Lin knew him slightly, and they stopped.

"Shocking thing—this about Le Quesne," Hayter said at once. "I was not altogether unprepared for it, but it's terribly hard on a man of forty-six!"

Lin nodded, preferring to say nothing.

"For a man at the top of the tree, too, he's always been very civil to everybody."

"So I have understood."

"You don't know him personally?"

"Not at present. He asked me last night to call upon him, and I said I would."

Hayter smiled.

"Ah, that is understood, you know. That is his way of showing that he doesn't put 'side' on. Now I don't want to offer you advice, but you are a young hand, and in the matter of general invitations from 'big' people, it is better to use a little discretion than to run the risk of kicking your heels while a lackey inspects your visiting-card, or tells you that there is no one at home."

The sensitive blood tinged Lin's face, but he calmly agreed with Mr. Hayter, and instead of going where he had honestly intended to go, turned in another direction. Hayter might have an unpleasant way of giving advice, but the advice itself was sound, or seemed so to Lin.

His mother let him alone until supper-time; then, with the innocent air of one who suddenly remembers a thing, she said:

"Have you heard how Mr. Le Quesne is to-day?"

"I have not."

"I thought you was goin' to call."

"I was, but somehow I don't think I will. Unequal friendships are not desirable. They are sure to drop off and leave a rankle behind."

"But he ast you to go, an' you said you would."

"I know. I am told it is his custom to give invitations in that way. I am advised to use discretion in the matter of accepting mine."

"Told! Advised!" She was pale and excitable. "You said you'd go, an' outside people's advice didn't ought to make you break your word."

Lin looked up, surprised. Annie did not flinch. She felt this to be a matter of principle, upon which she might venture to insist. Knowing her, Lin understood, or thought he did.

"You are right," he said. "I will keep my word. I will go."

And the following day, with an uncomfortable sense of impending humiliation, he presented himself at Mr. Le Quesne's door.

The man who answered it inspected him leisurely. Yes, Mr. Le Quesne was in, but was not seeing anyone at present, not even intimate friends: was forbidden to do so by his medical advisers. Even they—the servants in the house—had instructions to assist in the rigid enforcement of the order, "No visitors."

Lin took a card, scribbled "With kind inquiries" under his name, and having handed it to the solemn guardian of Mr. Le Quesne's privacy, went away.

"That's done with," said he, trying not to feel snubbed. "I've kept my word, and to-morrow I shall be off for the rest of the week."

Annie was at once relieved and disappointed when she heard the result of that call.

By the following Sunday Lin was at home again, and in the evening accompanied his mother to the last of some Lenten

services held in a West End church. When it was over, and they came out upon the crowded pavement, he turned round in answer to a touch on his shoulder from behind.

"Is it possible?" said he in surprise, with Le Quesne's hand in his own. "I'm—" He was going to say "Awfully glad to see you," but pulled himself up and said, "How-do-you-do?" instead, at which the curiously kind expression in Mr. Le Quesne's eyes deepened into a smile. He had grown used to reading people, and he read Lin very easily. He did not answer the conventional question.

"Is it not cold for you to be out?"

"I'm not supposed to be out, but I had the blues indoors, and couldn't stand them."

"And a bad cold, too?"

"No. I am a bit hoarse, that's all. Are you alone?"

"I have my mother with me, but she seems to have disappeared."

"Still the *same* mother?"

"On my honour! I must go in search of her."

"Find her, and walk to the end with me."

Lin had some difficulty in carrying out the first part of this order. His mother was nowhere to be seen.

"Well, this is odd!" muttered he to himself impatiently, turning back into the shadowy churchyard, "where on earth—"

"Here I am," said Annie faintly, stepping out from the shelter of the church porch. "Is—is he gone?"

"No; I am going to walk part of the way back with him. Come along. What made you run away like that?"

"You go," she said, desperately resisting all Lin's efforts to put his arm through hers. "I shan't come with you. I can't, Lin—I can't! No—*no*—you go alone! He didn't see me. Go quick! I couldn't come—not for the world!"

"But why? And he did see you. He sent me back for you. What on earth is there in him that you should make *this* extraordinary fuss?"

He spoke sharply in his impatience.

"I'm not makin' a fuss," she said, pressing back harder than ever against the wall, "on'y you know I never speaks to strangers—I can't. You never ast me to."

"But for once I do ask you. Come along!"

"I can't! You go with him an' leave me."

"How the dickens can I do that? Do you know we are keeping him standing in the cold, and he is as hoarse as a raven? You need not say half-a-dozen words if you don't

want to; but come you must, unless you want me to look like a—"

"Fool," he was going to say, but remembered that he was losing his temper, and checked himself.

"Now, no nonsense," he said coaxingly. "It is nothing but that. Come along—to please me."

She gave in silently, suffering him to put his arm through hers and draw her forward—she shaking like a leaf the while—to where the object of her terrible dread stood patiently waiting.

"Mr. Le Quesne—my mother," said Lin then simply, whereupon the gentleman lifted his hat, and the small, closely-veiled woman bent her head, but uttered never a word, so terrified was she. For the whole length of a long street they three walked abreast, Annie in the middle, her arm sometimes brushing Mr. Le Quesne's coat-sleeve as the crowd jostled them, her head almost on a level with his shoulder. To her it was an experience alike divine and terrible, for the touch and presence of him woke in her so much that it had been her daily task to subdue, and the dread of recognition had her in an iron grip. It seemed to her impossible that he could walk by her side and not *know* her. Why, she would have known him, living or dead, among a thousand. He bent towards her two or three times and spoke to her, but her tremulous, faint answers intimated to him that she was an extremely shy woman, and one in particular stamped her as uneducated, comprehending which, he considerably let her alone, and talked to Lin.

Once he caught sight of her face as they passed a lamp, and the same sense of familiarity which Lin had stirred in him moved him afresh, and puzzled him because he could not "fix" it.

At the corner of the street they all stood, she well back in the shadow of the wall.

"Come in," Mr. Le Quesne said cordially. "I'm all alone."

"Not to-night, thank you," from Lin. "We are expected home by nine."

Annie spoke up suddenly.

"I am; you're not."

"No, no; I couldn't let you go back alone."

"I know the way, an' I don't mind at all."

"Nonsense, Mrs. Warren," Le Quesne said hastily, "I could not hear of such a thing. If you will not come in, send your escort back to me when you have done with him."

"I'll do that," she said at once. "He shall come."

Mr. Le Quesne bade her a courteous "Good-night," while two hands which had not met for five-and-twenty years lay in each other for a second or two, and in one heart a long-smouldering fire burst into burning flame. This might be but the faint-hued ghost of the brilliant figure she had kept so carefully embalmed from decay in the secret cells of her memory, but better *this* than any living man the whole world through! Other men might be as men to other women; for her there had never lived but one. When she and Lin had walked a few yards she stopped.

"Go back an' catch him up," she said peremptorily; "I'm goin' home alone."

"I could not do that. I will come back later on."

"Go back now. He likes you. You can't tell what good it might do you to know him. I should have made you go with him, but you know I don't like strangers to hear me talk. Go back now."

"But, mother, he will not think any the more of me for leaving you to go to him."

"Say I made you go to please me. Don't vex me, dear—go back. He's all alone; he said so."

Lin, surprised but willing, went back, overtaking Le Quesne at his own door.

"My mother insisted," explained he, laughing. "She is a small person, but resolute; so I had to give way. She is quite at home in London, and, as I am so much away, has often to walk without escort."

"I feel like a brute to her, but a grateful one. Come up."

"I feel worse than a brute," Lin said, as he followed his host into a room where everything from end to end was beauty. "You are forbidden to talk. I shall be tempting you to break through restrictions which can only be imposed upon you for your own good."

Le Quesne turned up the lamps.

"They impose restrictions for the sake of appearing to do something, whereas there is nothing to be done. If you don't mind being talked to in whispers (it exasperates *me*), there is nothing else of consequence. Sit down and have a smoke."

Lin sat down. Le Quesne stood with his back to the fire and lit a cigarette.

"My people made a mistake the other day," he said, blowing rings of smoke upward, "I told one of the girls to tell Harker that when Mr. Warrener called I wanted to see him.

Whether she forgot or whether it was a conspiracy, I don't know."

"It was explained to me; and, of course, it was quite right."

"It was wrong. I asked you to come. Why did you not insist upon Harker letting me know you were here?"

"I scarcely think I could have 'insisted' when he told me you were denying yourself to your own friends."

"Who are they?" he said, with a shrug. "Why—now own up and tell me the truth—why did you not call the day after that concert? And why, when you did call, did you take a servant's word rather than mine?"

"That is severe," said Lin, trying not to turn red, "and—and—oh, hang it all! I dare say you know without being told."

He took his cigarette from his mouth, and gave Lin one keen look of unmistakable approval.

"That's better," said he. "Right. I *do* know. As far as I am concerned, don't do it again."

"I won't. But do you know that I had a rap or two over the knuckles about my impudence in apologising for you the other night? One or two people assured me that I had made—not only a mistake—but an impertinent mistake."

"The 'raps' were administered by people who were jealous, and, in consequence, spiteful. You should have laughed at that. Don't you see that you are making your mark, and that until you have made it the noble army of incapables will cry you down? After you have made it they will be the first to cringe. Take no notice of them now or then. Stay, though; I must not try to make you enemies, now that it is out of my power to make you many friends."

He smoked for a minute or two in silence, then went on, speaking with an odd mixture of graciousness and straightforward simplicity which Lin afterwards described to his mother as "fascinating."

"I am interested in you, not only because you are a singer, but because, if my impressions go for anything, you have qualities which in a young man are even rarer than good tenor voices. You are kind-hearted, and not ashamed to show it; also you trot your mother about, which looks well for your morals. May I be impertinent enough to ask how old you are?"

"Nearly twenty-four."

"An age at which most fellows are neither 'fish, flesh, fowl, nor good red-herring.' Who is responsible for your training?"



"My mother."

He looked immensely surprised.

"What, the little woman I saw to-night?"

"The same."

"Is it possible? Of course, she had assistance."

"Answering for myself, I might tell you none. She would tell you she had the assistance of God. I feel that I have no right to answer you in any other way, because she would not like it. To her, this is a simple truth—a reality."

"It is, I think, to every good woman. It is the splendid faith of good women that keeps the world going. Pity it is that they are so rare. Do you know that you have been very fortunate? And yet, knowing well the value of sincerity in our lives, you let Harker deny me to you. How was that?"

Lin winced.

"You are going deep," he said. "A man may know the value of sincerity too well to expect to find it in every fresh acquaintance."

"He might put his fresh acquaintances to the test on the chance of finding it."

"You are very merciless."

"And you are much too sensitive. Sensitiveness in a man is a drawback. It prevents him getting on in the world. Others who are without it get to the front while he is wondering whether or not it is bad taste to give his neighbour a push."

"I am afraid I can't alter my nature. Besides, you have outlived diffidence. I have not. You do not consider—perhaps do not even know—that the petty conventionalities—the *Harkers*—of life are mighty to those who are not initiated."

"It is odd to me that they should be so to any man who feels his own value."

"There you are. You know yours. I have to find out what mine is. I might have called here again, but have been away since Thursday."

"I know. I saw where you were singing, and I thought as I looked at the name that it was as familiar to me as your face. I knew some Warreners once. Their place was next to my uncle's, just outside Warwick. Are you in any way connected with them?"

"In *no* way," said Lin, with emphasis. "I have not a single relative whose name is Warrener."

And again he felt that conventionalities are mighty, and that snobbery is mightier. Mr. Le Quesne evidently accepted him for a gentleman—that is, for the son of a gentleman. He took

irth for granted first, and invited him to his rooms afterwards. The pause threatened to become awkward. Lin sat, the colour wavering in his face as he tried to decide to settle the difficulty in front of him. He felt ashamed of himself that it should be a difficulty at all. Clearly it was his duty to accept no man's hospitality in masquerade. He thought that Le Quesne was not the man to think any the less of him for doing that. But then it was so easy for a man to talk of another's "value" when his own was a matter of universal acceptance. All very well for him to say, "What are the barriers of conventionality to me?" He might as well be to ignore them, having his passport of "birth." Lin had no such talisman, and to-night he chafed a little at the closed gates. Le Quesne stood watching him with keen interest.

"What is it now?" he said gently; "another Harker in the way?"

Something worse than Harker. This: I cannot come here to bring you to think me other than I am. I am not a gentleman, as the term goes, and have no wish to pass for one. I have been thirteen years earning my living in a very humble way, and that I went into a City office. But for the kindness of an old friend of my mother's, I could not have been where I am now.

He found the money which sent me to Italy, and gave me my chance. I feel compelled to tell you this, because I like to enjoy any man's friendship under false colours. For the rest, I think it is no man's business but my own. Indeed, I have told you more I should be betraying private matters *not* my own at all."

Well," Le Quesne said, with a tone in his voice that was something more than kind, "and what are we leading up to?" "Simply to a clear understanding. I don't wish to deceive you."

I am not of your order, and I have no wish to come here with you. I were."

Saying which he stood up, and looked his new friend in the face.

I see. Well," going close and stretching out his hand, "Will you come here to please me?" "No," Lin's old pleasant manner turned at once.

Why, no," said he, with a happy touch of audacity as his hand met Le Quesne's in a close, firm clasp; "I will come here to please myself."

Bravo! As far as I am concerned, you may put your sensitive pride in your pocket. I think better of you for

having it, because it is a part of every true artist's composition; and though, as I say, it often stands in a man's way, it gains for him the appreciation of the very few whose appreciation matters. It is rather an odd thing that, being so sensitive, you have so little fear of the naked truth. Sensitiveness sometimes afflicts the moral constitution with a sort of spinal disease. Did you know that I could preach? I must have been making myself unpleasant. I have been prying into your private affairs, and moralising, to boot. Well, a man with one foot in the grave is privileged. He may be as objectionable as he likes; nobody grumbles."

An icy shiver ran through Lin.

"I shall do more than grumble," said he blankly; "if you talk like that I shall bolt."

"Yes? That is the way of most men. I *can't* bolt, you see. In any case, I must stay and face it."

"But it isn't true," said Lin, with stiffening lips. "It—can't—be true."

"It is true. I got Helston up in a corner yesterday and wrung the truth out of him. I believe it hurt him more than it hurt me. No man has more than his day, you know, Warrener, and I have had an uncommonly pleasant one. I'm not ungrateful. But because of this I go out when I am told to stay in, and I smoke when I am told not to smoke. I would rather live comfortably for six months than dismally for twelve. Wouldn't you?"

Lin pitched his cigarette in the fire, and was dumb.

"Now perhaps you will understand that 'conventionalities' matter nothing to me. They never did matter much. When you have seen life in all parts of the world you don't stop to ask a man for his pedigree before you shake hands with him."

Lin walked across the room to look at a picture.

"It is bad form to talk to you like this," Le Quesne said cheerfully. "You are young, with everything good in front of you. Youth hates misfortune, or disease, or death—it is natural enough."

"But such things are."

"Yes."

"And we know they are."

"That is so; but we show them a clean pair of heels when we can. Now, I believe you to be far above the common run of men; but when I tell you that I have to die, you threaten to bolt."

Lin walked back to the fire.

"You startled me," he said quietly; "but I will not bolt if you will let me stay."

"Not if I talk horrors and give you the blues?"

"Talk what you like. If this is true, as I hope to God it is not, of what else should you talk? It must be always in front of you—it is the one thing which is real to you. To talk of a trouble sometimes lightens it, and to tell a man to eat his heart out in silence that another man may be more comfortable is surely brutal, isn't it? But the worst of it is, I shan't be able to do anything for you, and that," finished Lin, with a suspicion of a break in his voice, "will be hard."

Le Quesne laughed.

"You shall bear me company," he said, "and I will promise you to keep the skull and cross-bones out of sight. Will you sing to me?"

"Of course; but I am afraid I shall sing badly. I would rather sing to all the newspaper critics at once than to you."

He sang very well, and in five minutes his new friend knew what he was worth.

"Do you mind being told that you have not a spark of the 'divine fire'? Not that you need regret that, for it burns one out too soon; but you have a voice that will serve you well and faithfully. I can be of some service to you, I think, although my singing days are over."

Lin was very late in reaching Merryon Square; but late as it was, his mother had not gone to bed. She gained nothing, however, by sitting up, for Lin was exasperatingly uncommunicative.

## CHAPTER XXXI

### LIN MAKES A PROMISE

It was a bleak day in March.

Lindsay Le Quesne, lounging idly in his big chair by a cheery fire, was indulging in silent soliloquy, a form of amusement which had lately grown upon him. For lately he had had something to think about, something interesting enough to put in the background even that ever-nearing end of everything which he had grown to contemplate not quite unheroically. He looked up as the clock chimed, rose to his feet, paced the long room a bit, easily tired of it, and dropped into the big chair again, with his face to the darkening windows and his thoughts running ever in the same groove. He was thinking of Lin Warrener, who, since that Sunday evening three weeks before, had often been with him, sometimes staying but a short time, sometimes staying half the day and far into the night, and always making himself thoroughly at home.

"I can't make this out," thought Le Quesne to himself for the fiftieth time; "can't quite see why I should have become so attached to him. I don't remember ever being attached to a man before. I have had plenty of friends, good fellows and true, for whom I would have done anything reasonable, and who, I believe, would have done anything reasonable for me. But this is a different thing. When Warrener comes into this room it affects me physically; so does the touch of his hand. It sets my nerves quivering. I feel as if I had lived before, and in that other life had known him. I can only put it down to that ghastly idea which I have not the pluck to set at rest. Now, clearly this is foolery. I will prove that in the very next talk I have with him. I can't think why I have not cleared it all up before. Three or four times I have screwed myself to the pitch of asking him about his name, and at the last minute my heart has given way. I have been so afraid of his answer that I have turned sick, like a fainting girl. Once he saw it, and just saved my senses by giving me brandy and opening the window. I've got past mental excitement—it kills me, but I must *know*."

The thing is at once so possible and so impossible ! He does not disown the name of Warrener, but I feel sure it is not his. He is nearly twenty-four. He bears a curious, but very unmistakable resemblance to me. He is as close as the grave about his family affairs, and, although he often talks of his mother, I have never heard him mention his—”

He gave a shiver, and covered his eyes with his hands, as if to shut something out.

“ It all fits in, but it can't be anything more than sheer coincidence. . . . His age ? That goes for nothing. His likeness to me ? I have seen chance likenesses just as striking. His voice ? History proves that remarkable voices are not hereditary. Still, I can't get away from the thought. Why, as that little fair-haired woman walked beside me that night, did something about her send me cold ? Why did her frightened eyes and her purposely-lowered voice conjure up before me a Berkshire wood on a wet summer night, and a man who fled out of it as from a thousand devils ? Oh, this will turn my hair gray ! ” He got up and paced the room, muttering, “ Warrener loves her, which *he* would not do if she were not worth it. He speaks of her as of one whose principles are quite above suspicion. Is it possible for the little rustic I once knew to have bred a son like Warrener ? I doubt it. For Warrener is the right sort—is *straight*. All his ideas seem to have been drawn from that which is pure ; he seems to have shot upward to the light as naturally as a young tree that is left to Nature, and unspoiled by what is known as cultivation. And yet, in spite of this, the stamp of gentlemanhood is upon all he says and does—a stamp which, by the way, he repudiates with a certain touch of fierceness. When I said something the other day about a ‘ gentleman,’ his mouth hardened, and the first approach to anything like a sneer that I have seen in him came across his face. What harm has a ‘ gentleman ’ done *him* ? I should not judge him to be vindictive. I have never come across a nature at once so manly and so affectionate. It is this which attracts me. Most young fellows in the presence of illness are like the proverbial cat on hot bricks. They hate it ; they are awkward and out of place ; they would as soon be shot as go where it is. But when Helston and the others had been knocking me about last Thursday, and had left me vilely ill and wretched, my youngster happened to look in. There was nothing of the cat on hot bricks about *him*. He stuck to me with the pluck and coolness of a doctor, and with more than the tenderness

of a woman. So far from having any wish to get out of it, he stayed because he wanted to stay, because if there were anything to be done for me he would rather do it than let anyone else. It may be odd, but it is true. No one has ever cared a straw about me since *she* threw me over; no one has touched me or looked at me as my youngster does since she used to sit on the arm of my chair and put her arms round my neck, and—make a hopeless fool of me! I have had a good many things worth having since then, but never a scrap of genuine affection. Therefore am I grateful to Warrener, who offers it to me now. I wonder if she has made a fool of any man since? No, at least I may concede her that; I know she hasn't. It is eighteen years since she sent me adrift, and yet if I know her—I say 'if'—she loves me to this day. If I were to write to her—I say 'if' again—and say, 'Nell, I am dying, and I'm very lonely, will you come to me?' I should have but to know where she was to know how long it would be before she was with me. I am not likely to write, for she killed in me all that was worthy to live. Having raised me to Heaven, she dashed me down to—to earth. Not lower than that, thank God—no, not lower! I was only lower than that—*once*; which recollection brings me back to Warrener. Ah!"

He stretched out his hand and touched a bell. A trim girl answered it.

"Will you get me a North London Directory?"

"Yes, sir."

A few minutes later the book was forthcoming.

"May I light your lamps, sir?"

"Thank you."

This done, Mr. Le Quesne opened the Directory, and turned to Merryon Square.

"No. 19—No. 19—here we are: 'Thomas William Holt.' Are there two 19's? No? Then who the deuce is Thomas William Holt? and what has he to do with Warrener?"

He threw the book on a chair, and going over to a little table, tossed about a heap of visiting-cards until he came to the one he wanted.

"Mr. Lin Warrener,  
19, Merryon Square, Camden Road, N.W."

"Lin! Lin! What an odd thing that his name should be an abbreviation of mine! Is that coincidence, like his unevenly-set eyes? Yes, seeing that that girl never knew what my name was, it must be—coincidence."

He threw himself down afresh in the big, luxurious chair, and, lying back, closed his eyes, but still could not shut out that haunting dread.

"Did I not go down there? Do I not know that the girl went to Canada, and that the child died? Whose word have I for that? The word of Mrs. Drake, who may have been genuine, and who may—not. I was wrong. I ought to have sifted the matter to the bottom; I ought to have had proof, and been content with nothing less. Well, I must get it—now, and the dread of what such proof may mean is shortening my life."

As, indeed, it was. He looked desperately ill as he lay back there with closed eyes, and his hands, as they rested on the arms of his chair, trembled visibly. These signs did not escape the notice of some one who, entering quietly, bent down and looked at him.

He felt the presence, and looked up with a start.

"My dear lad, I did not hear you."

"No. I knocked, but came in quietly then, thinking you might be asleep. Did I startle you?"

"No!"

"Feeling ill? You look so, and—worried."

He laughed.

"That must be because I thought you had deserted me. Isn't it late?"

"Yes. I was humbugged about the first part of the day, and then, as I was near some old friends of mine at Brixton, I looked in, and could not get away."

"Have I not heard you speak of your Brixton friends before?"

"I expect you have. They were friends to me when I wanted friendship; they understood me and sympathised with me when even my mother failed to give me comprehension or sympathy."

"What were you doing then?"

"I was a clerk in a City office, and desperately discontented and wretched."

"Wretched? I don't like to think of you being that. Will you tell me about your early life? Go back as far as you like—you won't bore me."

Unsuspecting Lin went back to the shop at Brixton. His companion listened attentively, but took the first opportunity of interrupting.

"You say you were eleven when you went to Brixton?"



"About that, I think, or rather over."

"Where were you before that?"

"At St. Saviour's Schools."

Le Quesne's throat was very dry, and he spoke with difficulty; but Lin, grown used to his husky voice, did not notice that it was more so than usual.

"Are not those Schools for—*for—fatherless lads?*"

"There are many such there, but I don't think it is a 'condition.'"

He moved in his chair, and, bending forward, buried his face in his hands. "Were you a fatherless lad?" was surely an easy question to ask, but for his life he could not ask it. Lin's former remark, "If I told you more, I should be exposing affairs which are not my own," came back to him now with a curious meaning. He steadied himself and said:

"You *are* a Londoner, then? I did not think your mother spoke like one."

"I am a Londoner—yes, but my mother is a Berkshire woman."

He sat very still, while the room went round with him, and the cheery lamps, receding, left him in a dark mist that lay cold and wet upon his forehead like a clammy hand. He felt for the arms of his chair and clutched them hard, fighting desperately for calmness and self-possession. Now—this matter must be cleared up. One more point *was* cleared up. What nonsense! Was there but one woman in all Berkshire? Truly, when a man's physical forces failed him, he was at the mercy of nerves and womanish fancies! He would reconnoitre a bit, and give himself time before he put the question which would settle everything.

"Any water there, Lin?"

"Plenty."

Lin poured out the water, noticing how the hand that took it from his shook.

"You are a nervous rag," said he, with affectionate severity.

"I believe when I am not here you mope."

"I do, for fresh air. By the way, I was going to write to you the other day, and lost your card in the heap, so I turned to the Directory to see if No. 19 were yours. I only found the name of Holt, and couldn't understand it, as you are living at home."

"Mr. Holt is the friend who sent me to Italy. My mother is his housekeeper. She was that in Mrs. Holt's time. Leaving out the couple of years she spent with us at Brixton,

she has been in Merryon Square for the last four-and-twenty years."

And still the terrible point was not cleared up. As long as he was skirting round it, he managed to keep himself in hand. No sooner did he determine to come to it than his heart failed him. It was beating now, a slow, irregular thud, which repeated itself in his brain until he was past bearing it. He tried several times before he succeeded in speaking clearly enough to attract Lin's attention, for one of the lamps was too high, and Lin had crossed the room to lower it.

"Your father is, of course—dead?"

The question once fairly asked, he sat upright, waiting to be put out of his misery, with sight and sense slowly dying down into a darkness something like to death. Was it that he could not hear, or had Lin failed to answer him? He waited in pitiful uncertainty,—for a few seconds only, but they seemed to him interminable.

Lin put the lamp right, then stood looking at it while he mentally framed his answer.

"My mother," he said at last, in a voice the hard severity of which fell upon his listener with the stunning effect of a physical blow, "was deserted before I was born. Of the man who deserted her it is not my custom to speak; but in case you should attach any dishonour to the name of Warrener, I had better say at once that it was not his, any more than it is mine. I have no more right to the name of Warrener than I have, for instance, to *yours*."

Le Quesne's long-held breath came quiveringly through his lips again; his heavily-beating heart seemed to leap up in him and stop. Still clutching the arms of his chair, he turned his head to the curtained doorway leading to the room beyond, trying to measure the distance between it and him. Could he hold out long enough to put that pitiful little distance between himself and—*what*? Between himself and that which was part of himself, bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh, quickened with keenest life of his giving! He was alone with it!

Let him but make one sign of distress, and a hand would touch him mercifully, not knowing; a voice would speak to him affectionately, not knowing; eyes would look anxiously into his bloodless face—eyes that he dared not meet, because from them his own looked back at him. With the strength of sudden horror he struggled to his feet. They refused to carry him. His eyes were dim, and the curtained doorway was lost in a thick mist; in his ears was a continuous ringing

like the strong vibration of many wires. And still, if only he could struggle to that door, and know that it was locked before Lin had time to see that there was anything wrong with him!

Three times he tried to make even one step forward. The third time he knew that it was useless, and gave in. With a long, piteous moan of pain, which startled Lin beyond description, he dropped back in the chair and fainted.

Lin was beside him in an instant.

"I ought to be shot!" he burst out angrily. "A fool could have seen that you were not fit to sit here talking, that you were holding out for sheer obstinacy. I shall know better another time. What shall I do with you? I'd rather look after you myself than turn you over to anyone else."

He looked startlingly grey and death-like, but Lin did not lose his head, or set the bells ringing, or make any sort of fuss. He set to work quietly with water and eau-de-cologne and a handkerchief, having first sat down on the arm of the big chair and taken Le Quesne's head tenderly on his own shoulder, where it remained long after the brain therein had recovered its power to suffer.

It seemed to Lin a long time before the husky voice reassured him. It was faint and very languid.

"Is it you, Warrener?"

"Yes."

"Anyone here besides?"

"No one at all."

"I'm glad of that. I apologise for giving you so much trouble."

"You are no trouble to me. You know that."

"Perhaps I do. Don't move me, and don't be frightened. I'm all right—now."

"I am not frightened," Lin answered, with a gentle pressure of the uncertain hand that was trying to find his; "but I wish you wouldn't keep about when all the time you feel like dying, and never say a word about it."

"I thought I should have conquered it, but it conquered me. Warrener!"

"What is it?"

"When my time comes, and I *am* dying, will you stick to me?"

"You are very merciless," said Lin in distress.

"But *will* you?"

"I will."

"That is a promise," Le Quesne said wearily, "and one that *I* have no right to exact from *you*, God knows !"

There were no more confidences that night, although when Lin felt at liberty to leave for Merryon Square the clocks were chiming for midnight.

## CHAPTER XXXII

"WILL YOU COME WITH ME?"

For a few days following that talk Le Quesne gave himself up to hopeless certainty, and was very quiet—a state of things which occasioned Lin no surprise. A man who was ill, who knew that on this side of the grave he could not expect to be anything else, who owned that sleep only came to him in broken snatches, and that weary as his days were, they were heaven in comparison with his nights, might well be expected to be quiet. There was one thing to be said for him—he never complained.

"Do you never get a wiggling for keeping such unearthly hours?" he said to Lin once.

"Never; and do you know that my mother's forbearance in the matter surprises me. The dear old man grumbles at my everlasting absence, but the mother says never a word."

"I am indebted to her. She seldom goes out, you say?"

"Very seldom. As a rule, to church and back. I had the greatest difficulty in getting her out"—"to hear *you*," he was going to say, but substituted "to that concert on the 3rd."

Le Quesne smiled. Even that memory was losing its bitterness.

"I should like to see your mother," he said slowly. "I mean, I should like to talk to her. I suppose she would not, for instance, come and formally hand you over to me for the next few months."

"I am sure she would not. She would as soon be shot as talk to a stranger—a stranger out of her own sphere, too."

"I saw very little of her, but is she not a pretty woman?"

"I think so."

"Have you a photograph of her?"

"Yes."

"When you can think of such a trivial thing, put the portrait in your pocket."

A day or two later, when Lin was leaving Merryon Square, he remembered that request, and turned back into his own room for the purpose of complying with it. Entering, he

paused in confusion, for his mother was putting the room in order, and the photographs, in a folding leather frame, stood on the dressing-table just against her.

"What is it, dear?" she said: "I thought you'd gone."

"No, I forgot something, and came back for it."

"Anything I can get you?"

He walked over to the dressing-table.

"I want these. I'll bring them back to-night."

She flushed fiery red, and shutting the frame, laid her hand upon it.

"What do you want them for?"

"Mr. Le Quesne wants to see them."

She tightened her hold on the frame.

"Lin," she said, "you've bin talkin' about me to Mr. Le Quesne. It wasn't like you to do that. I don't like it."

"Gently," said Lin, with a touch of annoyance. "I *have* talked about you, but not as you think I have. You might have trusted me not to do that. I daresay I can tell you all that has passed. He asked if I were a Londoner, and said he did not think you spoke like one. I told him you were a Berkshire woman. He also asked if my father were living. I took my time in answering that question, wishing to be satisfactory without betraying you. I told him that you were deserted before I was born, that I did not wish to speak of the man who deserted you; but that it might be as well to acknowledge that my name was not Warrener. I said no more about you; in fact, almost as soon as I had spoken he fainted."

Her hand pressed upon the frame so heavily that the frail glass cracked across with a faint "click."

"I daresay you wus frightened," she said. "You rung for somebody to come to him?"

"No; I pulled him round myself. The day before yesterday he asked me if you would go and see him."

"Oh, *no*," she said piteously; "you know I wouldn't."

"I told him so. It was then that he said he should like to see a photograph of you."

She saw why on the instant. He wished to be sure. When he *was* sure, would he tell Lin of the discovery he had made? She drew the frame nearer, still keeping her hand upon it.

"He've forgot that by this time," she said; "he very likely said it without any meanin'. I wouldn't like you to take it, Lin, please."

"I think that is nonsense, mother."

"It isn't nonsense. I can't let you take it."

"Then show me one sensible reason for refusing him such a paltry request."

"Show me one sensible reason for him makin' it."

"You belong to me; he takes a great interest in all which concerns me. I suppose he likes me."

"That's on'y natural. You've got a kind way, an' if he's ill an' lonely I can understand how he likes to have you with him. But I don't want you to talk about *me*. I don't see the need for it."

Saying which, she took the photographs from the table, prepared to retain possession of them. Lin turned a trifle "rusty."

"You mean you won't let me take them?"

"I means that I'd rather you didn't."

"Oh, very well. It is a paltry thing to make a fuss about, either way! Of course, when a dying man makes even a paltry request, one likes to grant it if one can; and I would go far enough out of my way to gratify any wish of *his*. Still, this is your affair. Good-bye."

She stumbled across the room, was at the door as soon as he, and stood with her back against it, looking at him.

"*What* did you say, Lin?" she said piteously. "A *dyin'* man?"

"That is so. He knows it."

"That makes a difference," she murmured. "I didn't know. How should I, when you never told me?"

"One does not cry it all over the place. Perhaps I have been hoping a little, and perhaps I have felt it too much to talk about it to any one. For I like him as I never liked a man in my life. He has a fascination for me—had before I ever spoke to him, and the more I see of him the more I admire him. It takes a man with a backbone, with some real good in him, to face what he has to face, and to show no sign of fear or of revolt. He has had it all! Success great enough to be called Fame; wealth more than enough to satisfy him, for his tastes—though refined—are very simple; and the hope of marriage with a beautiful woman gifted like himself. He is only forty-six, and everything is over with him, everything but the wealth, which cannot even obtain for him a few hours' immunity from pain! Do you think you would not feel for him as I do? Do you think the sight of his patient pluck wouldn't go to your heart as it does to mine? Do you think that if he asked you to do some trifling thing for him you would hesitate to do it, knowing how little any one *could* do?"

She shook her head, trying to reiterate that, of course, she had not known. How could she, when he had never told her?

"I have told you now, that you may make some excuse for me if I seem to be turning my back upon my old friends for the sake of making more influential ones. Personal advancement has nothing to do with this particular friendship. I should not run after him for the mere honour of being associated with a famous man. In fact, I don't see how anyone could look at him and still have any hankering after what we call Fame. I know I have steadied down wonderfully on that subject since I have known him. I say, with conviction, that I would rather he left me his character than his voice."

She turned her eyes to Lin, with an expression in them half of triumph and half of despair. Had the time come for her to say, "And this is the man of whom you would believe *no* good thing?" She half thought the time had come, but was steeped to the lips in self-distrust. Until now, Heaven itself had worked for her. She felt too clumsy and too ignorant to interfere. She held the photographs out to Lin.

"You can take these if you like," she said. Ay, and the very life of her with them, if it could have done that dying man any good!

Lin took them, feeling a little ashamed of his impatience as he looked at her pallid face.

"I'm afraid I have made you think that I keep my kindness for strangers," he said, walking across the room after her; "but when I am not with him he is alone. And I believe that, failing me, he would prefer to be alone. For he is very considerate. When the doctors come he sits down while they probe, snip, burn, and torture his throat, until he is too shaky and sick to stand it any longer; but he never fails to thank them, with what little voice remains to him, for what they have done, or to smile at me when I have tried to pull him round a bit, and ask me if I really think it sensible to make two persons suffer where one would do?"

With her hands pressed hard to her throat, and her heart like lead in her, she stood and listened. Lin was in a communicative mood, and she did not wish to check him, though she knew not how to listen quietly.

"I suppose there's many a poor soul as bad off or worse than him," she said presently. "He's rich. That makes things easier. With so many when sufferin' comes, want comes too."

"I know, and that is hard; but with him there is some-



thing harder. What the memory of his sight is to a blind man, the thought of his lost voice is to a singer who can sing no more. I had felt that before, but the other day it came home to me with a force that has left my heart sore. I know you don't quite follow me, because you cannot enter into the love of a singer for his art; but if you had seen the thing as I saw it the other day, you *would* have understood. You could not have helped it. He is awfully good to me in the matter of giving me hints on music, and he takes no end of pains in seeing that I do a thing as it ought to be done. I had been playing something, and I did not play it to his liking, so he turned me out and took it on himself. He has the velvety professional touch, the perfect comprehension of the thing he plays, which are matters alike of artistic gift and faultless training. Well, as he played—it was Beethoven's 'Adelaide'—he lost himself in it, and *forgot*. Carried away by its beauty, as I have been many a time, he opened his lips to sing it—

Lin's voice died away. He turned on his heel and was silent. Annie crept closer and laid a hand on his arm.

"I *can* see," she said—"I can see as that must have bin bitter hard to bear."

"Hard! He flung himself face downward on a couch and sobbed like any girl. That is the only time I have seen him give way. Helston came in not long after and kicked up an awful row because he found him so prostrate. Now, I must go. You won't sit up, will you? If I leave him early, the nights are so abominably long to him, so I'm sure to be late."

"I won't sit up. I know what long nights are—that is, I did once, an' I never forgot. You can tell him," with a curious emphasis on the verb, "that I said as long as you wus any good to him I'd be thankful you should stay."

He kissed her, and wondering a little at her cold face, took it playfully between his warm hands.

"If I deliver that message," he said, "you may lose me altogether."

She only writhed her lips into a smile, and drew away from him, wishing him gone.

"Where are the photographs?" said he. "Oh! here we are. Good-bye."

Lin walked into Le Quesne's beautiful room as cheerily as ever, and was welcomed in the usual way, with a sudden smile and a lingering pressure of the hand.

"I get earlier and earlier," said he; "I shall soon come to breakfast like a Frenchman. What have I here? The

photographs you wished to see. I had a bother over them. My mother can't imagine why anybody should wish to see *her* portrait. Been reading?"

"Only a poem in a magazine. It has set me longing for a sight of the sea—and, Lin, I must have it."

"Getting desperate?" said Lin gently.

"A trifle that way. Sit down and read this; I will be with you in a moment."

Lin took the book over to a window and sat down. Le Quesne, taking the leather frame from the table whereon Lin had laid it, went through to his bedroom. Safely there, he opened the case, looked steadily at the fair face therein, and at dawn to think things over. Time had wrought marvellous changes in Annie Deane, but this was she. Any doubt to which he might have clung was settled for all time. That wayside weed which he had trampled upon and left to die had not died, but, nourished by the Love-spring within it, had lived and marvellously thriven; had even come up all the sterner from his cruel tread, and had borne a blossom which the winds of Fate had blown right home to—*him*! He threw the frame upon the bed. Of the portrait within it he thought but little, except as of a missing link in his chain of evidence. What he thought of was the tall young figure in the next room, of the bright young face, of the eyes that were so like his own, of the hands that were so gentle when they touched him, of the voice that was so tender when it spoke to him! And his tears forced their way as he thought, and his heart went out in passionate yearning to the lad whom he dared not own.

"*My Lin!*" he muttered wretchedly to himself. "The one thing in the world which is mine, but to which I may put forward no claim. Lin! I must somehow have let my nickname drop. She picked it up, and gave it to the boy. Well, if he knew, he wouldn't thank her."

When he re-entered the drawing-room, Lin was still reading, so he re-laid the frame upon the little table, unobserved.

"This may be poetry to the poetical," cried Lin dictatorially, "but to me—it's maudlin!"

"Your education has been neglected, young man; but the poem is good."

"Well, we'll give it another chance, and see what we make of it—"

" 'I have come again to the sea, where first for me was the light of the sun—

The sea that in travail and toil of years has been to me home and mother.

I have seen the world at its best and worst ; and now that its worst is done,

I have come again to the sea, where first for me was the light of the sun.

Lost is the glory of light that burst on my soul, and what have I won ? Smiles that shatter and scorn that sears : there is one true heart—none other.

I have come again to the sea, where first for me was the light of the sun—

The sea that in travail and toil of years has been to me home and mother.'

"Takes a deuce of a lot of breath," said Lin irreverently, "and breath is so valuable, when one lives by it in more senses than one. Besides, why say a thing three times over when once is enough ? If a man does that in prose, he is voted a bore."

"You are hopeless." Le Quesne, with a laugh, took the book away and threw it on a chair.

"The fact is," said Lin, "a little poetry goes a long way with me. I took on the study of it at the wrong time. I approached it in the spirit of revolt rather than that of reverence. A fellow in the same office with me used to feed upon it, and was as full of quotations as a girl's birthday book. I found that I could stand Shakespeare because he was so colossal ; he seemed to rebuke everything into a great peace. You dare not cavil at him ; he is so mighty, and yet with it all—a *man* ! A man who did not despise the 'common herd,' because he saw that they had their God-given right to live ; that they were even of some account. Your modern poet is different. He wraps himself in a serene disdain of the great majority which keeps the world going. 'You don't understand *me*,' says he, with his nose in the air. 'Well, by such as you I do not desire to be understood. I write for the chosen few !' And this, mark you, is, as a rule, said by the man who has all the good things of life to start with ; who goes at his leisure from one favoured spot on the earth to another ; to whom the ordinary grind of *living*—of finding out how to keep body and soul decently together—is a thing unknown."

"Lin, don't get excitable."

"I must ; I can't help it. You see, I come of the great plebeian majority. I am a Nobody, and I feel with my kind. I remember once reading some rules framed for men's guidance by one of the mighty ones—he was a poet, too. He recom-

mended that every man should endeavour to keep himself up to intellectual pitch by reading some noble poem every day of his life, by seeing some great and elevating work of art, etc. I got no further than that. 'Great Heaven!' said I, 'what impudence!' How about the millions of poor devils whose sole idea of poetry is a street rhyme? whose only notion of a picture is the grocer's yearly almanack, or the coloured supplement to an illustrated paper? Are they not men too? Is there not an earth for *them*? There had need to be a heaven. I dived a bit into the personal history of the great man I speak of, and I found that, like most preachers, his practices were open to question. In his relations towards at least one woman he was not immaculate, not even what an ordinary man would call honourable. It is true that she was socially beneath him, was of a different order of being; so I suppose that honour in his dealings with her was not necessary. She simply didn't count!"

The colour flushed slowly in Le Quesne's face.

"I am sorry I started you on this subject," he said; "you are getting bitter, and it is a mood that does not sit well upon you."

"I am not bitter; I only feel with the rank and file, with the 'nobodies.' By the way, have you ever read 'Nobody's Story'? Of course you have. To my mind, it is the finest bit of prose ever written by one who wrote nothing second-rate. An inspiration, a flash of real genius, it is yet intelligible and homely. Let your high-falutin' 'poet' match it if he can!"

Le Quesne was slowly pacing the long room. Lin's opinions jarred upon him somehow. Yet who was responsible for them? Of a surety, nobody but himself.

"So you wash your hands of the poets?" he said.

"No; but I have set up for myself a poetical standard beyond which I am content not to go. The learned tell me it is not art at all. Never mind, it is nature. We may take it to heart and warm ourselves by it, may even learn from it a wholesome lesson or two very well worth learning. Longfellow is the woman's poet, they say. He is also mine."

"Don't monopolise him. Few people know him better than I, and I quite appreciate 'a wholesome lesson or two.' I should like to give *you* one. You know the 'Hiawatha'?"

"Do I not!"

"You remember the introduction?"

"Oh, yes!—

“ ‘Written with little skill of songcraft,  
Homely phrases, but each letter  
Full of hope and yet of heartbreak,  
Full of all the tender pathos  
Of the here and the hereafter.’ ”

“ I mean something before that—a passage which contains the germ of a religion I have often felt I should like to preach if I had been fit—the necessity for human charity—

“ ‘Ye whose hearts are fresh and simple,  
Who have faith in God and Nature,  
Who believe that in all ages  
Every human heart is human ;  
That in even savage bosoms  
There are longings, yearnings, strivings,  
For the good they comprehend not—’ ”

Now you, in sheer unthinking prejudice, would extend to the savage a charity which you would deny to the Somebody simply because he *is* somebody. And, Warrener, you are a bit in the wrong. I have seen more of life than you, and I must beg a little charity for—Somebody. He has a heart as well as Nobody, though custom may have taught him not to wear it on his sleeve. Also, he has a mental hide, which, being of finer grain than your protégé's, is far more easily vulnerable.”

That speech made Lin wince. It seemed to imply that he had been personal. Before he had made up his mind what to say, Le Quesne went on :

“ Now, come here and talk to me upon another subject. I have been talking to Helston. He held forth on the evils of my being alone, and frightened me by announcing that I must have a nurse. I said I couldn't think of it, that I could not entertain an elderly lady for my own sake, nor a young one for yours. At which he said that as long as you were here, we could get on. So it comes to this: Will you throw up your profession for the summer, and go to the coast with me ? ”

Lin did not answer at once.

“ I know, of course, that I am asking you to make a great sacrifice. You are just fairly started ; to withdraw from your profession now means withdrawal from public notice, and consequent loss of reputation—”

“ I don't care about that,” said Lin impulsively.

“ Then you are a trifle peculiar.”

“ Don't mistake me ; I do care about it, but I would rather risk it than leave you alone.”

"You would like to come with me?"

"I should, but I should like to be at work as well."

"For love of it?"

"No, for the sake of my own independence."

"Then you see that your profession does not stand before me, but your pride does. Are you going to turn me off for that? You were not so particular with Mr. Holt."

"That was different. I knew that if occasion arose I could repay him."

"You can repay me in a commodity which money cannot command. Already I am very heavily in your debt. By the way, your old friend may be disappointed. He helped you on, and may feel annoyed at your withdrawal. Will you let me repay that two hundred? It is a thing I should like to do."

"No, no," Lin laughed. "What a rum thing to want to do! The dear old chap gave it me so kindly, and I wouldn't hurt him for the world."

"Why should it hurt him? He is nothing to you."

"He is the best of things—an old, tried friend."

"Well, settle this matter. Will you come with me? By this time next year you will be free again, and your voice will be all the better for a long rest. You who have so much time need not grudge me a few months. Any engagements ahead?"

"A few, up to the end of the month."

"Don't accept any more. Tell your mother to send your traps on here, and I will tell them to prepare you a room. Hand me that portrait of your mother. . . . You are not like her. By the way, where did she get your odd short name?"

"I haven't a notion."

"It is an abbreviation of mine. My mother was a Lindsay. I was born, and she was buried, at sea. I often wonder if this accounts for my love of the sea. The best days of my life have been spent upon it—I mean the real red-letter days which stand out boldly in one's retrospect."

"I can recall but few," Lin said thoughtfully. "I have *one* vivid recollection—of a day's excursion into Berkshire when I was a little chap of five. My mother had such a longing for me to see the country that she spent a whole sovereign and took me down for the day. I think I was more awed by the wonderful quietude than impressed by the beauty of things. One thing, however, remains with me to this day—a sort of terrible grotesque! My mother and I were on the wood side of the hedge, quite hidden from *any one* who might have been in the road, but *very* near

a gate which opened on to it. I can only suppose, now, that a man stood in the road, undecided whether to turn in at that gate or not. Right in front of it was a broad turf ride. The sun was low and red, and the man's shadow stretched along the turf gigantic and appalling. I began to whimper, and my mother, though she tried to reassure me, was startled too. I don't suppose you follow me, but it is a weird memory to me, and has assumed the form of chronic nightmare. Only a week or two ago I was dreaming of that same thing. I thought I was trying to extricate *my* shadow from *that* shadow, and couldn't. I was still struggling when I woke up."

"How long ago is that?"

"Eighteen years ago in the month of June."

Le Quesne dropped wearily into a chair.

"Eighteen years ago," said he, "in the month of June, I was to have been married. I remember I went on an excursion to Berkshire instead."

Lin did not remark upon the coincidence, but crossing to Le Quesne's side, laid a gentle hand over his haggard eyes.

"You had no sleep last night?"

"Very little; but I don't see how you should know it."

"Lie down now, while I amuse myself by trying to find some beauty in this blessed poem."

He pushed the couch nearer the fire, lowered the blinds, made his charge comfortable, and himself the same.

"Lin."

"What is it?"

"Am I to understand that you will come with me?"

"I think so. And now I may as well make a confession. The other day when I was late I had been in answer to a telegram from my little Austrian 'Madame.' She is taking a concert party through India, and she offered me very good terms to go with her. But for the thought of you I should have gone."

In response to this confession Le Quesne's hand went out to rest across Lin's knee. Lin took the hand in his own, and settled down to the "blessed poem," while his charge fell asleep.

As the time passed drowsily by, he dropped his book on the floor and fell a-thinking, with his eyes on the sleeper's face.

"It is a queer thing to do, and you must have a wonderful grip of me, or I shouldn't do it. What will be said of me *for* doing it will be enough to set any man's ears tingling. You must have had grand times of it! 'I have seen life at its best

and worst.' You are entitled to make that assertion. All 'champagne and truffles!' Now it is 'vin ordinaire,' and the bread of bitterness. It is such a terrible come-down that it makes one's heart ache. Any other man would grumble and curse his fate, but there is a nobility about you that adversity can't touch. You have had it all, and yet I don't think you have been altogether happy. I wonder why you parted from that woman. She must have been hard to please."

He picked up his book and went on reading. Apparently his presence had a quieting effect upon his companion, who slept for more than two hours, then woke with a shudder of remembrance and a painful struggle for breath.

Lin raised him pitifully on his arm.

"I know," he said, "your throat's dry. I'll get you some water, or there's plenty of milk here. Marion has brought in tea. Is that better? Even an ordinary bad throat is dry as a chip when one has been to sleep, you know."

"Well, if ever there was a good, kind soul in this world, that young Mr. Warrenner is that soul," said Marion, the maid, to the stolid Harker. "He waits on our Mr. Le Quesne hand and foot. He glared at me for rattlin' the tray just as a mother might if you threatened to wake a cross baby."

Harker nodded mysteriously.

"There's a ladder up to our first-floor window," said he, "as some of you will see through presently. You'd have seen through it before if you'd had any eyes."



## CHAPTER XXXIII

### "TO MAKE THE PUNISHMENT FIT THE CRIME"

"HAVE you told your people to send on your traps here?" Le Quesne asked Lin a day or two later.

"I don't think I have. As you spoke of going away so soon, I thought it unnecessary to change for such a short time. Also, for three days this week I must be away."

"I cannot get away as quickly as I hoped to do. Helston told me yesterday that I am not fit. He says I have gone back. Here he comes. I heard his carriage-door bang."

"Then I will go into your room. If you want me, let me know."

Dr. Helston did not put his patient to the torture that morning—simply examined him a little generally, and then sat down.

"I am going to be unpleasant," he said. "I am going to speak my mind and pry into yours. Now, what's the matter with you?"

"That is surely for you to say."

"No; I am at fault. We are doing our utmost to prolong your life, and as fast as we do—you *undo*."

"I really don't understand."

"Then I will explain. Your local malady is intelligible to me, but your general condition is not. You are variable; your nerves are all to pieces. Now, do you—what in speaking to a woman I should say—fret?"

"What about?"

"Your own condition."

"On my honour, I do not."

"Nor about the loss of your voice?"

"I have left all that behind."

"I thought so. Therefore I am the more at sea."

"I wish I were at sea."

"Have you settled your affairs? No, I am not saying good-bye to you; don't think it. I have many patients who will

die before you, if only you will give us a chance ; but is your will made and all that sort of thing ? "

" I have had occasion to make my will afresh."

" And your other business matters ? "

" Warrener is seeing to everything for me now."

" Ah ! " Dr. Helston turned his spectacles full on to Le Quesne's face, with a sharp pair of eyes behind them. " Nice fellow—Warrener ? "

" Very nice."

" Known him long ? "

" No."

" Dear me ! He is much attached to you."

" I believe he is."

" And you to him ? "

" That is so."

" Who is he ? "

Le Quesne hurriedly nodded in the direction of the curtained archway through which Lin had passed. The doctor repeated his question in a lower key, but met with no reply.

" Do you know ? "

" I do."

" Does *he* know ? "

" He does not."

The doctor got up and stood close to his uncommunicative patient.

" I thought so," he said. " It dawned upon me two or three weeks ago. The likeness is too peculiar to be a chance one. I knew your father, whose physical peculiarities are reproduced in you. If I know anything at all, Warrener is a Le Quesne too."

" For God's sake, be quiet."

" I cannot afford to be quiet. I must speak for your own sake. I can see how things are, although the precise circumstances may be unknown to me. The thought of telling him something that he does not know is sapping your life away."

" That, I believe, is true."

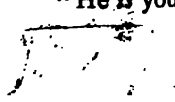
" Then you must send him right away from you or make a clean breast of it and tell him."

" I can't send him away. He makes life endurable to me. But for him I might be tempted to end it."

" Nonsense ! Why not tell him ? "

" I cannot tell you why, but neither can I tell him anything. It gets more impossible every day."

" He *is* yours ? "



"He is mine."

"Well, I have told you, while you are eating your heart out like this, you are giving yourself no chance."

It was so. For the first day or two after Annie's portrait had settled what little doubt he had, he had felt more at rest, and had consequently improved in health. But as the days passed the temporary relief passed too, giving place to a longing for open acknowledgment, for mutual understanding. The more he saw of Lin, the more convinced he became of the utter folly of telling him in what relation they stood to each other. Lin would infallibly turn his back upon him, would change from Lin the merciful to Lin the merciless in a few terrible moments. The thought of such transition was too bitter; he could not face it. Once or twice he made up his mind to see Annie herself, but from that ordeal also he shrank with a shudder of disgust. Thought of renewed intercourse with her was revolting. Even in thinking of Lin, the remembrance of his being *her* son took something away from his value. If he could but be separated from her! If only the Deane in him could be set aside, as Nature had set it aside, simply stamping him with the Le Quesne seal! He felt the brutality of such thoughts, but they were with him all the same. The thought of Annie Deane produced in him a sick shiver like that produced by some edible to which one has a strong antipathy. He fought against it, but it was there. How had she found out his identity with the false lover of her youth? Of one thing he was certain: she had not disclosed it to Lin. Therefore surely she must still be in doubt? He conjectured, resolved, wavered—resolved again, until his brain reeled, and it was little wonder if his health were unsatisfactory. Even Lin failed to rouse him to anything like animation, and but for the wistful, affectionate way in which the restless eyes followed him wherever he went, even Lin might have begun to fancy himself unwelcome.

"There," cried he cheerfully one evening, "I have despatched the last letters, and am free to go about my own business. I must start early to-morrow morning, and I cannot anyhow get back until the day after. Own up that you will be glad to be rid of me."

"That goes without saying. I have a man coming on business in the morning, and I shall take the opportunity of writing the two or three private letters that you could not write for me."

"At the end of which you will be pretty well used up. I wish I weren't going. One thing—it is my last long journey."

"Come and sit down. You will not mind a little business worry by and by? I want to make you an executor under my will. Will you give me your baptismal name?"

"I will do whatever you really wish me to do; but actual name have I none. In the eyes of the law I don't exist."

"Never mind the law. What name were you baptized under?"

"My mother's name of Deane."

"Thank you. I was obliged to ask, for the sake of accuracy; that is all."

"I understand. I hate having to tell any one, even you. Not for my own sake, because I can't believe that any right-thinking man or woman would think less of me for a thing with which I had nothing to do. Directly I own that my mother is an unmarried woman, everyone reads that as '*a bad woman*,' which she never was, and never could have been."

"Is uncharitableness so rampant?"

"As regards the sin of a woman, I think so. You have seen a good bit of all sorts of life; but even you, although you speak leniently and say, 'Ah, well, such things are!' in your heart think that such women are sinners, and must expect to be stoned."

"I have not said so. I do not think so."

"I cannot help it if you do," said Lin, a trifle aggressively.

"I care nothing for any man's speech or thought upon this subject. I apologise to no man for my mother. She is a sympathetic, selfless soul, who has toiled for years in the hope of seeing me benefit by her martyrdom. She is—oh! where is the use of me saying what she is?—it is that which makes me savage! What avails it that I have proved her to be good, and honest, and pure? I might assert it until I was hoarse; nobody would believe me."

"I am afraid you are right. You will do better to keep your faith to yourself. You will not make converts, and you will make—enemies."

Lin shrugged his shoulders. How was he to know that a very miracle could not have converted this man, who remembered her but as a pertly-pretty little rustic; who, so far from finding her "good, and modest, and pure," had found her as clay ready to his half-unwilling hand. No, the miracle could not have converted Lindsay Le Quesne to *that* faith!

Again the sick shiver went through him as he remembered that Lin was his and—hers.

"I have often thought," he said slowly, "that the mistakes of women are unjustly dealt with. There is no gradient in the case. A woman is either at the top or at the bottom. Some day we may arrive at a fairer adjustment of things, may discover how to 'make the punishment fit the crime,' like another 'Mikado.'"

"Then," said Lin quietly, "there will be many *men* cut off for ever from every domestic tie, and from the friendship of every right-thinking person."

"Better hang them at once, or herd them away from civilisation, as they do the lepers."

"Hanging is reserved for murderers. A life for a life is still exacted. The honour of a woman is as much to her as her life. Then let the man who takes it forfeit his own."

"You feel strongly concerning this particular sin?"

"I do. I would as soon have to answer for the crime of murder as for the ruin of a girl; I would as soon shake hands with the man who had committed the one sin as with the man who had committed the other."

Le Quesne moved uneasily and put his hand over his eyes. Lin bent down and looked at him.

"All right?" he said, with a sudden change from severity to infinite kindness. "I keep my eye on you since you collapsed without warning a week or two ago. I can't afford to have my nervous system shattered in that way."

"I don't think I shattered it then, did I?"

"That's a different thing," Lin laughed. "You see, I didn't know so much of you. Now I think you have magnetised me. I declare solemnly that on the days when you are extra queer I don't feel worth a rush myself!"

He kept his hand so as to shield his eyes from Lin's.

"Being so sympathetic in one way, I should like to make you so in another. As you spoke just now, I was thinking how tremendously severe you young ones are upon a sin to the committal of which you have never had any sort of temptation? What can you know of the after-life of a man who has fallen a victim to such temptation? Perhaps if you could follow that you might see that he was punished quite enough."

"I am afraid I should see nothing so satisfactory. We all know that there are plenty of criminals of this stamp who go scot-free."

"We *know* nothing of the sort; we see their outside lives, and

rush to our own conclusions. 'A man's heart knoweth its own bitterness.'"

"I know, but a man who could do a thing like that could have no heart at all."

"Have I not told you that

" 'In all ages  
Every human heart *is* human' ?"

"I could tell you a history which might make you doubt it."

"Tell it me."

"No. I have no right to make it public."

"There is one point upon which your faith is greater than mine," said Le Quesne slowly. "Your knowledge of women is limited. When you know more of them, they will cease to be each a goddess on her own pedestal, and man's scepticism as to their divinity will become more pardonable in your eyes. But I must hold my tongue. I don't want to corrupt you."

"I don't think you could. All my ideas of women are derived from one good woman. Whatever of good there is in me is derived from her."

"Perhaps. But were you much with her? Were you not, as a matter of fact, at school?"

"Yes; I saw her twice a week."

"You saw more of others. I should take it that your character was moulded by them. Self-reliance came to you early, also outside sympathy and comprehension. And, by the way, did not your mother fail you later on? Your own determination, and the help of outside friends, made you what you are. Really, I cannot see that you owe her as much as you think you do. Circumstances and the difference of education severed you. You must very early have left her, so to speak, behind."

"Ah! you do not know, and I believe it is useless to try to tell you. The fact is," he laughingly bent over Le Quesne and rested his hands on the framework of the couch, "you are bristling with aristocratic prejudices. You don't know it, but you are."

"Absurd!" He laughed, too. "And if I am, what has that to do with it?"

"Simply this: I have admitted that my mother is an uneducated woman. I have also told you that she is a deeply, outspokenly religious woman. Now, even on the subject of religion you are intensely aristocratic. Only the other day you said that you could not talk much about

religion, nor believe in the man who did; that religion got louder as the social scale descended, until at last it got to the street corners and a brass band. I watched you, and I thought what an out-and-out aristocrat you were at heart."

"Lin, drop that word! It is as bad as the obsolete 'genteel.' I have seldom heard it used until I heard you use it."

"Well, you see I am not, what must I say—patrician? So why on earth you took to me, I cannot imagine."

"My *dear* lad," he lingered over the words, trying to hide the tenderness in them, "whatever else you are, you are genuine, and the rest goes for nothing."

Lin stood upright, went across to the piano, and played a bar or two of the quaint thing that was ringing in his head.

"There you are," he said lightly; "it's just another 'Pink trip slip for a six cent fare.' I can't get rid of it—

" 'To make the punishment fit the crime,  
The punishment fit the crime.' "

"We are in sympathy. It is ringing in *my* head. Do you know that if ever I had committed any—any—such sin, as—as the one we were speaking of just now, I might be tempted to think that my punishment *had* fitted the crime?"

"What a ghastly thing to say! And how have you ever been punished until now?"

"Sit down and I will tell you."

Lin sat down close to him, with his half-smoked cigarette between his lips, and his arm thrown in half-careless, half-caressing fashion across the head of the couch.

## CHAPTER XXXIV

### "I WILL REPAY"

"I don't think I ought to let you tell me anything. You know talking is bad for you."

"I have been quiet for two or three days, and I don't find it makes much difference. I want you to remember what I say, because of a time that is coming when you will know more of me than you know now."

Lin looked surprised.

"I shall never know anything," he said heartily, "that will alter my opinion of you."

"That is a rash assertion."

"Yes? Never mind—I make it in all confidence. You see, you have been a sort of hero to me for years. And now to think that I know you, to find that I was not mistaken in you, to know that I am privileged to be of some small service to you—well, I say in all sincerity that this is the keenest pleasure I have ever known."

Le Quesne smiled, but his eyes filled.

"I am a sorry 'hero' for you, Lin. You make me think I had better hold my tongue. Why should I be so anxious to undeceive the only person who has ever made a hero of me? I am sure I don't know. I suppose your ideas of women have set me thinking of my own early impressions, and I can see what has made the difference between us. To begin with, you reverence your mother. I have no idea what manner of woman my mother was. I was educated with a family of cousins, and I lived with them until I was old enough to turn out on my own account. The uncle who undertook to bring me up was a solicitor, a substantial 'family' man, who was received by the county people, whose daughters rode to hounds, and whose sons were in expensive regiments, going the pace with the fastest. There were four daughters, and (don't let me shock you) not one of them worth a thought! Selfish, vain, unintelligent, *fast*, they had but two ideas—the first was to get money, the second to convert it into dress. I



hope such girls do not grow in every family, but they grew in that one, and they lowered my ideas of womanhood for all time. All those girls married. Heaven knows why! My aunt did nothing to check the fearful extravagance. In fact, she was as extravagant and as useless as the girls themselves; and, as far as I could see, other women who came to stay in the house were pretty much the same. They looked upon me as a boy, and seldom troubled to take any notice of me, so I had ample opportunity to sample the conversation of women, married and unmarried, when such conversation is *en déshabille*, and I can tell you, Lin, that very often it was anything but—nice. When my cousin Madge, a girl of eighteen, became engaged to a man of forty, I well remember some old-fashioned friends of my uncle's making a special journey into Warwickshire, armed with clear evidence of the bridegroom's hopeless depravity. My aunt heard the evidence without turning a hair.

"'Simple spite,' she said; 'nothing but spite.' For her own part she should not dream of taking any notice of it, much less of permitting it to stand in the way of Margaret's marriage.

"Marriage was the thing, you see, Lin. They *must* marry. No matter whom, as long as he was socially up to the mark. Neither a man's age nor his habits mattered a jot, as long as his family were good enough, and his pocket deep enough. A boy fresh from college, or an old sinner on his last legs—both were fair game, and both were hunted. I grew to think of all women as fair frauds, with a dangerous hook attached to the third finger of the left hand. Anyway, I tell you that when I was your age I held women very lightly."

"I can understand that," Lin said. "You saw no reason to do anything else; you had been to such a bad school. Your opinion of women altered. I want to know when, and why."

"It began to alter directly I got among women who were making their own way; who were, in plain language, earning their own living. No matter whether by necessity or choice, the effect was to ennoble them. I had always had a hope that there were women who had souls above the level of a draper's shop window. Very soon after I entered the musical profession that old hope began to strengthen in me, and as it strengthened it gave an earnestness to life that I cannot explain. I did not understand it then, for I was blind to much that to you has been clear everyday experience. I have no hesitation in saying that when I began life on my own

account I could not have loved the best woman God ever made. I could not have sufficiently freed myself *from* myself. There was not in me to comprehend a good woman, because I could not have believed in her. I looked upon marriage as the very last folly which any man with a seeing eye could commit. It was such a splendid institution for women that it must of necessity be a bad one for us. As time went by there dawned upon me an idea that I had, perhaps, been wrong, and that the true interests of the two sexes were, after all, identical. But nothing happened to make me study that matter until I was nearly six-and-twenty."

"Not much of an age, after all," said Lin leniently.

"I don't think my age excused me. I was as old at eighteen as you are now, and older. But then, you see, you have had no work, and work is the finest safeguard against evil ever yet discovered. As soon as I began to work I was a better man.

I had been singing nearly five years when I met Miss Leveton. It was my first season in opera. We were singing together, and saw a good deal of each other. I had heard much talk of her, and had smiled in derision. A little virtue in a prima donna, as in Royalty, goes a long way. But soon found that all I had heard was plain, unvarnished truth. Don't be afraid; I am not going to give you a long description of her, but I should like to give you some idea of what she was, or you might not comprehend what followed. She was

a combination of opposites, which says little, because all harming women are that. She was a creature of ideals, and yet intensely lovable and human; rarely and variously lifted, and yet a very fireside witch. She had money in her own right, which she devoted entirely to charity, hoping thereby to ameliorate the condition of those less happy than herself. She lived upon what she earned, and that by no means luxuriously—or not more so than was necessary to the maintenance of her position as an opera singer. In her private life she was simple to the verge of severity, and never saw her in an extravagant gown. A staunch Roman Catholic, she had seen too much and dived too deeply into things to have any bigotry about her; but religion was real to her, and guided her every action. I can safely say that I never heard her say a malicious thing, that I never knew her revaricate or coquette with the truth; I know she would not have told a lie to save her head. She once owned to me that she felt very deeply her responsibility towards God. 'He had tarted her so generously,' she said, with the little homely way

of expressing herself that she had sometimes. She felt she must live up to her gifts, that as so much had been given her, so much would be required. Now, can you fancy the astonishment with which I heard a woman talk in that way? Can you imagine the effect it had upon me when I found that here was a woman who in the midst of wealth was simple-minded, who in the midst of temptation was loftily pure, who in the midst of success great enough to turn the brain of the levellest-headed man alive was steady, unelated, utterly unspoiled? As I grew to know her better, to realise that she *was* what she seemed to be, my old self fell away from me. I was a new man. I remember a few fearful weeks in which I staggered about like a man who has been trying to look at the sun, and then through a woman I saw what manhood should be, and, through that vision of manhood, I saw God. What *she* was to me, some woman will some day be to you—simply the woman one loves. There is no miracle, Lin, though every man thinks one has been wrought for him alone. Even now my old superstition clings to me, for I believe I loved that woman as never man loved woman yet! You see, she was so well worth loving. It took one out of the common to convert me, but being converted, there were no half measures possible to me; I fell down and worshipped her. I had not anticipated my conversion by giving a little faith to one goddess here, and to another there. I had lived as men do live, certainly not better, perhaps a little worse; but I had never cared two straws for a woman before that time, as I have never cared two straws for a woman since, although from a scoffer at them all I grew to look upon the sorriest wreck among them as sacred, for was not she, too, a *woman*? and had not a woman once been dearer to me than life? Does it sound like high-flown nonsense to you, Lin?"

"No," said Lin quietly, "it sounds like truth; but I cannot like your Miss Le Breton. To my mind's eye she is stone—I beg your pardon, marble. I feel I should like to give her pedestal a stealthy push."

"She was not stone—she was dainty, passionate flesh and blood. All her opinions were deep-rooted, and she had the courage of them."

"Say she was a strong-minded woman, and have done with it," said Lin resignedly. "For my part, I say, from anything like a strong-minded woman may Heaven and all the saints deliver me!"

"Why? She is above a weak-minded woman, as a man with a will of his own is above one who has none!"

"You admire women whose aim in life is to shriek from every available platform, and to seize the House of Commons for themselves?"

"My dear lad, take my word for it that they are infinitely preferable to the women who squander God-given wealth on their own empty vanities; who move heaven and earth to find husbands, but never one finger to make of themselves wives; who bear children because it is the one natural process from which they cannot escape, but who afterwards turn their backs upon every other responsibility connected with them. Their dress and their dogs take up their spare time. Hired nurses, of whom they know nothing—with whom they themselves *could* not associate—are good enough for their children. Your platform shriekers are better than they; at least, they are in earnest about something."

"You cannot mean that you would care to marry a strong-minded woman?"

"I should prefer her to a woman who had no mind at all. The man who shuns intelligence in his wife is either knave or fool; he either fears to be found unworthy or empty-headed. I think any sensible man would prefer to share his life with his intellectual equal rather than with his inferior."

"Please let it stop at equality; don't tie a man to his intellectual superior. He wouldn't have the ghost of a chance; he would be simply snuffed out."

"He would have every chance. Superiority of intellect is rarely self-assertive. The wider the culture, the greater the courtesy. A cultivated woman would be far more likely to appreciate what is due to a man than an uncultivated one. Don't make the mistake of supposing submission to be the peculiar attribute of ignorance. It is quite the reverse."

"I shall have to invoke the aid of my old friend, and tell you that

"What I most prize in woman  
Is her affections, not her intellect."

"A matter of natural disposition. Ignorance does not breed affection any more than culture kills it. The nature which is affectionate will remain so, whether the intellect be cultivated or not."

"I do perceive that I am worsted," said Lin, with a touch of tragedy. "Let us get back to your goddess."

"Who was so human that she loved *me*? She braved the wrath of her people and the grave disapprobation of her Church.

In less than six months from the time we met we were engaged to be married. I was like the man in 'Maud,' then, Lin—I had my 'day.' It lasted a few short weeks. There was nothing to wait for, so we resolved to marry quietly, without delay. Everything of a preliminary nature was settled.

"We sat one evening together, discussing the tremendous change in people which is brought about by marriage, the severance of trivial ties and friendships which marriage effects, and she spoke regretfully of some letters which she could not quite determine to destroy, and yet had little wish to keep. They were a man's letters. She sealed them carefully up at last in order to put them away, and then laughingly asked me—what about mine?"

"I laughed, too, and going through into my room—yes, that very room yonder—I brought out a drawer into which I had tossed the contents of an old disused portmanteau: piles of old letters, nothing more. I remember I spoke with light-hearted contempt of them and of their forgotten writers, and she shook her head at me in rebuke.

"'Burn them,' I said. 'They should have been burnt before.'

"There was nothing there of which I had the slightest fear—nothing, I felt quite certain, by which any woman could have been compromised. What man in his senses would keep letters of which he was afraid? Besides, I knew Miss Le Breton perfectly. I knew she would read nothing there except by express invitation, or with a view to destroying anything manifestly worthless. I left her to amuse herself with the bonfire while I wrote some letters on business connected with my marriage. As I was addressing my last envelope, she asked if I had finished.

"'Very nearly,' said I. 'Have you?'

"'I can get no farther,' she said, looking at me in an intent way peculiar to her. 'What is this? I found it with this old photograph of you.'

"I got up and took the thing out of her hand.

"Such an innocent-looking thing! It was, Lin—my 'bolt from the blue'! Merely a few words written on a business memorandum' telling me of an incident which had come under the writer's notice, and with which I was associated."

He paused, compelled to pause by the heavy beating of his heart and the consequent unsteadiness of his voice.

"No, no, there is nothing the matter with me," he said, in

answer to Lin's anxious regard of him; "but I have never spoken of this to man or woman, and the thought of it stirs me to this day."

Which was more lie than truth. It was not the thought of Helen Le Breton which set his heart a-throb to-night, and parched his lips until utterance was a matter of effort. His dread of that parting years ago had been great, but the dread of parting with Lin was far, far greater. And he was getting perilously near to the confession which might bring it about.

"But what *was* it?" said Lin, with a touch of excitement, as he threw his cigarette end into the fire.

"You remind of her. 'What is it?' *she* said, as I stood there like a man in a dream. 'Lindsay, tell me that the woman is—*mistaken*.' I told her—God knows what I told her! The thing looked so black against me—*was* so black—that the more I tried to explain, the more I condemned myself. I saw it in her whitening face and her altered manner. I gave up, and was dumb."

"But what had you done? Nothing heinous, *I* dare swear!"

Here was his chance. Now was it clearly his duty to give Lin back his faith in him, and say:

"The thing I had done *was* heinous. As you judge, *she* judged."

Le Quesne paused, turned coward, and let his chance go by. Some-sort of confession he must make, but rather than tell the naked truth to Lin, he felt he could have suffered death.

"Heinous!" he repeated wearily. "To her it must have—have—seemed so. Judging as she judged, it *was* so. Her standard of—of—morality was high, and when a woman loves a man she rarely takes him for what he is; she takes him for what she herself has made of him."

He spoke half impatiently. He *was* impatient—with his own cowardice. So far he had but lain the blame of their parting upon Miss Le Breton's ultra-fastidious sense of honour. Where, even now, was his own?

"Warrener," he said abruptly, in his torture, "I have never tried to make myself out to be a saint, have I? You seem to speak as if I had. Don't I tell you that there were many by-ways off the high road of my life down which I could not have taken a woman like Miss Le Breton?—a woman who held that a man's life should be morally blameless, since he demands a spotless record with the woman he marries."

"Did she expect to find such a man?" said Lin drily.

"I cannot say. She knew that I was not such a man. Still, there was one thing far back in my life of which I had not told her, for a reason hereafter to be given you. Before I had reached the age of one-and-twenty I had treated a girl what men in our life would call *shabbily*."

He paused again. Could he let it stop at that? Did *that* mild word do justice to the situation?

"Shabbily, according to our creed; unpardonably, according to hers. Unpardonably, now, according to mine; but when I did it, I did not see as I see now. Women were no marble goddesses to me then, Lin. They were hollow casts—shams—not even whitewashed, some of them, and the one of whom I speak had been to me the cheapest of them all. I had gone my way. My studies abroad, my success both there and at home, had put the girl out of my head. In my heart she had never had a place. God forgive me, I had never thought her worth it. I was wrong. Anyway, on the eve of my marriage with Helen, that—that girl of whom I speak had passed out of my memory with the shadows of all the others. There was but one reality, and she was to be my wife."

He stopped and glanced at Lin. He, sitting forward in a chair with his hands clasped about his knee, was intensely interested, but—in Le Quesne's side of the narrative solely. Odd as it may seem, the *motif* of the story, the unknown "girl," utterly passed him by. The narrator saw it, with a mighty throb of relief.

"Well?" said Lin.

"Well, there we stood—I with the cursed paper in my hand, and she watching me. All I could get from her was, 'Tell me the truth. No matter how bad it is, tell me the truth.'"

"I recalled the circumstances as well as I could, and told her everything. Ninety-nine women in a hundred would have forgiven me, but I had had the courage to love the hundredth, and she hesitated. She said she must have time in which to think the matter over. I gave her as much as she chose to take. The next day she sent for me. She said that she was unable to keep herself any longer in suspense; that in trying to come to a right conclusion she saw one gleam of hope for herself and for me. She said I knew her. I knew she held that a man should be as far above suspicion as the woman he married; that he had no right to demand a purity in her which he could not claim for himself. I knew that in

promising to become my wife she had set aside her opinions, or rather, in her great love for me, had ignored them. In her great love for me she was prepared to go farther still. Would I tell her why—when I had told her of many other things—I had made no mention of this one girl?

"I saw our 'one gleam of hope' die out. I made no answer.

"'You were afraid of me?' she said, with an eagerness that, in her, was pitiful. 'You thought I would not forgive you?'

"I told her I had had no such fear.

"'You thought that even if I forgave you I should think of it afterwards, and that, rankling, it might destroy my faith in you?'

"I said the reason had not been that.

"'Then what was it?' she said hopelessly, for she knew as well as I did.

"'I did not tell you because I had forgotten all about it.'

"That settled things. She sat down on one chair, I remember, and grasped the back of another with both her hands.

"'You have gone farther,' she said, 'than I feel justified in following any man. I cannot be false to myself, or how could I expect to be true to you? Although I might have given myself to a man who had done a thing like this, I could not trust the man who could forget it when it *was* done. I should not feel safe.'

"I accepted her decision. I went my way, and she hers. I have never seen her since."

Lin sat back in his chair.

"She never altered her mind?"

"If she did, she never said so. Now, do you see how Heaven took up the cause of the despised? I had once thought a girl too low for my consideration; the time came when a woman thought me too low for hers. The girl I had forgotten was very well avenged."



## CHAPTER XXXV

### FOR OLD ACQUAINTANCE' SAKE

THERE was a long pause.

"I don't like that goddess of yours," said Lin at last. "I am sure she would have made you a terribly exacting wife."

"Perhaps. I walked out of my fool's paradise, and have never sought another. But ever since I have felt what it is to be shut out. I have been like a man who passes for a millionaire, and knows himself for a beggar."

"While there were scores of women who would have thought it an honour to share *your* life?"

"Perhaps it is because there are 'scores' that a man fails to find the one; perhaps I had no heart to make the search; perhaps I saw in the whole matter a Hand against which we are powerless. Still, the hankering after something to care for, something which should care for me, never let me alone; and one day as I was passing through a village in the Midlands I saw a lovely little curly-headed chap playing with the dust and stones in the road. I fell in love with the youngster, thought it would be a real good turn to take him from his sordid surroundings and bring him up decently. His people demurred a little, but money soon silenced them. I brought him to London, engaged a highly superior person to look after him, surrounded him with all a child wants, and much that it does not want, but—I never succeeded in winning from that child one particle of affection."

"What an extraordinary thing!"

"It was all the more extraordinary because he was really an affectionate child. I tried him for more than a year, until he had become as distasteful to me as I was to him. Then his nurse married and he fretted after her, refused to countenance her successor, and became a veritable nightmare to me. As I had bowed to Fate in the matter of a wife, I bowed to Fate in the matter of the child. I gave in, and wrote to the youngster's people stating why I wished to be relieved of him. My letter was returned to me. Tempted by unaccustomed money, the

whole family had emigrated. After a heap of trouble I succeeded in tracing them to California ; after a heap more trouble I found somebody who was willing to take the child out to them. When he got there I had a letter from his father, who, having failed to do any good, considerably laid the blame upon me. He said I had tempted them to sell their child ; that the money had been a curse to them, and that they had never prospered since they had touched it. I can't tell you what I spent in that attempt to win a little affection, because I never knew. Well, I had turned my back upon affection once, and I was condemned thenceforward to seek it in vain."

"Have you not grown morbid over that unlucky recollection?" Lin said cheerfully. "You say you once treated a girl shabbily—"

"Very shabbily, Lin—worse than shabbily."

"When you were young," pursued Lin, unheeding, "and had been spoiled by bad training. I know the privilege of sex is enormous, and a man ought to be extremely careful not to abuse it. Still, he may find that he has made a mistake, and it may be more justifiable to 'jilt' a woman than to marry her."

"But the man who even jilts a woman is voted a cad."

"When she knows that he is chafing to be free? Surely between honourable people an understanding is all that is necessary—a little straightforward explanation."

Le Quesne sighed restlessly. They were getting wide of the point now, and he was too cowardly to turn back to it. Lin must learn the truth in a different way.

"Explanation?" he repeated. "There are times, Lin, when explanation demands a moral courage denied to the average man. He dare not explain—he bolts."

Lin nodded thoughtfully.

"Well," he said, rising, and beginning to pace the room, "I stick to my point. I say that it was no part of Miss Le Breton's work in life to pass sentence upon you. Whatever you might have done worthy of rebuke, it was before you knew her ; to whomsoever else you had been false, to her you had been true."

Le Quesne half rose, watching Lin with painful interest.

"You honestly think that?"

"I do."

"You would not think it part of *your* business to take up the cause of another for conscience' sake? You would not

fight some one else's battles if it were against some one for whom you had any love?"

"I am an ordinary person," Lin said ruefully, "and I am afraid I could not fight against any one I loved, even in the cause of right." He stopped a second, struck by the strained expression of Le Quesne's face. "Now, if it were the other way about, I could understand it. I might take up the cause of one I loved against a stranger, and fight for it as if it were my own."

"Ah!" His eager face fell. "And if you stood between two people, both dear to you—how then?"

"I should try to bring them together."

"Impossible! How then?"

"I should have to decide which side had right upon it, and take my stand upon that."

He dropped back upon the couch, and turned his face away from Lin.

"There would be small need for decision," he said, "since the matter does not admit of any doubt."

Lin stopped, and bent forward, trying to look into the averted face.

"What are you driving at?" he said, half bantering and half in earnest. "You are very mysterious to-night."

The averted face came slowly round, the dark eyes, heavy with painful tears, looked straight up into Lin's.

"It's the old story of the missing moral courage, Lin," he said. "Time will explain to you, but I—I haven't the pluck."

Some far-off glimmer of the light to come touched Lin at that moment—startled—puzzled—eluded him, like the touch of an unseen hand, and then was gone, lost in the intensity of his faith in the man beside him.

"You are down in the dumps to-night," he said lightly, "and I believe it is because I am off to-morrow. I ought to be off now, for it is past eleven."

"Just the time of night I hate. Sit down and tell me that story you spoke of just now. You said you had no right to make it public. Telling it to me will not make it so."

Lin sat down with knitted brows and an uncomfortable vision of Annie's reproachful face.

"I have no right to do it," he said. "My mother would never forgive me if she knew, but I want you to know what love can do for women who are not gifted; who do not set themselves up for anything out of the ordinary run; who are simply unselfish and womanly. She was only a little peasant

girl. She had no advantage of any sort that I can discover ; was poor and ignorant, and quite content to remain so. Somehow—I can't tell you how, for I don't know—she came in contact with a—a—well, *she* calls him a—gentleman."

"She told you this herself?"

"Yes. You see, I was going away, and was rash enough to ask for information concerning my paternity. This—this—man (one must call him something), having amused himself in his own vile way, got clear away, leaving her neither name, address, nor any clue to either except a photograph. In proper hands that might have been of use, but she kept it to herself. She afterwards brought it to London, to the place where it was taken, thinking in her ignorance that the photographer would tell her who the original was, and where to find him."

"Did you ever see that photograph?"

"I have never asked to see it, nor do I believe she would show it me if I did. She would be afraid that I might try to find him."

"Surely a needless fear?"

"Perhaps, and yet—I don't know. If I ever think much about it, I lose my head. I sometimes feel an irresistible longing to see for myself what the man to whom that devilish deed was possible, is like. From what I can gather, he was an educated man, a man of means, of an age I should say near about my own ; but of that I am not sure. And he left a child of sixteen to face her own ruin by the aid of his photograph and a sum of money. What do you think it was?"

"God knows!"

"Five pounds! And sometimes I think that if ever I am face to face with him I will crush a five-pound note into some convenient shape, and force it down his throat, if I hang for it!"

Le Quesne suddenly struggled to his feet, and stood leaning against the mantelpiece. Lin spoke with a curious quietude, but about the depth of his feeling on the subject there could be no mistake. Le Quesne made none.

"And you think your mother would thank you for trying to avenge a wrong which she has been content to bear in silence?"

"No. I believe if I were to raise a hand against the hound she would hate me. For she loves him—has openly told me that I bear a certain amount of resemblance to him, which has made me doubly dear to her! It is just this part of a very unsavoury story which tempted me to tell the whole to you.

I was ill when I heard it for the first time, and it upset me horribly—upset me so that I daresay some of the points were lost on me; but I shall never forget how she pleaded for that cur, nor how desperate she got when I reviled him. His very vileness was lost upon her because it *was* his. He told her black was white, and she believed him! 'He left me plenty of money—he believed I should have married Jim; he didn't know what I should have to go through, or he wouldn't have left me to bear it. How could he have known, when I did not know myself? If I could only have let him know, he would have come back. He wasn't bad; he was young, and didn't think; but in his heart he was kind and good. I tell you I know he was. Lin, if you've ever cared anything about *me*, you mustn't say a word against *him*. I won't hear it.' That is how she kept on; and what is more, she meant it!"

"Yes?" He spoke with a touch of incredulity. "That being so, is it not strange that she could not have gone the whole self-sacrificial length, and have kept his infamy from you? Instead of which, she seems to have been careful to put you in possession of just those points of the history which are hopelessly damning to him!"

Lin looked at the speaker in surprise.

"Knowing her, I don't think it strange. To have done what you suggest, she must either have refused to tell me what it was my right to know or have put me off with a tissue of lies. As to those damning facts of the history, believe me, she actually put them forward in defence of him, so little—good woman and just as she is—is her judgment of him to be trusted! When she saw what I thought of the business, saw that all defence of him was out of the question, she did what it seems to me natural for your genuine woman to do. She shut her eyes to the sin, and stood prepared to stand by the sinner through thick and thin! She tried to make a convert of me. God forgive me for being angry with her that she should think it possible! She actually believed that she could win me over to see that man with her eyes; to believe with her that he had sinned indeed, but unintentionally, unconsciously, not realising the gravity of his own act."

"It is a pity that you should refuse to be converted, for I believe that she is right."

Lin swung round on his heel to face Le Quesne.

"You—*what*?" he said blankly.

"I believe she is right."

"You don't mean it! You cannot mean that you—a man of the world, knowing well what things are—could attempt to defend such a thing as this? For her to try to excuse the human devil who ruined her, and left her in recompense his portrait and five pounds, is perhaps comprehensible; for you to do so is not only incomprehensible—it is absurd!"

"I make no pretence of doing so. I only say that a woman may be a better judge of even a bad man than you or I, or any other, save the God who made him. In fact, her judgment is near akin to the Divine. 'The sin I hate, but the sinner—I love.' Can you not see that this is possible? For this particular sin, who would try to defend it? Of course, it was brutal."

"It was not," said Lin hotly. "Give a brute his due, and don't malign him. He stays by the brute he mates with. In his poor, dumb brute fashion he defends her. He will even lose his life for her, and he will do his best for his helpless brute cubs, until the time has come when instinct teaches him that they can do without him. But this contemptible thing, with brains to tell him right from wrong, and education to preclude all possibility of his mistaking the one for the other, slunk away, and left a child not seventeen to find her way through difficulties which might well—had she but realised the nature of them—have made her give herself up to despair and the river. And yet you are so extra merciful, you would like to think that he did not know what he was doing! I think he did know very well, for he took excellent care to get clear away, leaving no trace behind him. You may have wondered why I was so hard upon this unrecognised 'crime' the other night. Now you know. Of course, you cannot see it as I do. It has never come home to you, so you can't be expected to feel it. But if this thing had happened to anyone *you* cared for—by George! you would feel it then! You would not stop to consider whether or not this man was quite sure of what he did. It would be enough for you that he did it, and the thought of him would raise the devil in you, as it does in me."

His elbow resting on the mantelpiece, his white face resting on his hand, Le Quesne stood for some moments in silence.

"You say she knows now who the man is?" he asked at length, without shifting his position.

"Yes, she has since found out."

"You do not know—how?"

"I did not ask. I lost all patience, and preferred to know nothing more about him. I think she put forward some extraordinary idea of her own, that as she had sinned once and been sorry for it ever since—so had he. It exasperated me beyond expression. Her atonement has been made before all the world. If he has been moved by any desire to atone, he has had four-and-twenty years to do it in, and has never made a sign. I think that speaks for itself."

"Are you sure he *has* made no sign? He may have tried to find her, and failed."

"May have tried! Are there no newspapers? Are there no such things in them as advertisements? Or, if so much publicity were distasteful to such a delicate mind as his, are there no Private Inquiry Offices? Don't tell me about a man 'failing' to find any woman who is alive, and not in hiding. You seem to be infected with my mother's desire to handle this particular criminal apologetically. It wouldn't take much to prove to you that he was no criminal at all."

"You are out of temper, and, in consequence, unreasonable."

"That is very likely. Have I not told you that I never willingly think of him? I have not; it won't do. More than once I have been startled to find how much of the devil there is in a man; even in an ordinary man such as I. Do you know that at first I used to dream about him—dream that I had him in my grip? and I have knelt on him—stabbed at him—shaken the vile breath out of him—choked him with my naked hands—have watched him gasp until there was no breath left in him to gasp with, and then I have let him go for—*dead*! Oh! it is no fiction. When I think of that man all the good in me takes flight, and there is nothing but a vengeful devil left."

Le Quesne stood upright. There was a look in his eyes which told that he was at the end of his self-control. He put one shaky hand in front of Lin's distorted young face.

"Don't say any more," he said, speaking with difficulty, for his lips were stiff and dry, "I can't bear it. I have associated you with all that is good and merciful. If it is in you to be anything else, I don't want to know it. You have become dearer to me, more necessary to me, than you know, and I cannot stand that look upon your face. On your own showing, it is as distasteful to your mother as it is to me. She has lived longer than you have, and has come nearer to the truth. She knows that life is not long enough for us to go out of our way to punish other people's sins. It is enough for us that we try to atone for our own. Let us do that, and be content."

Lin felt "pulled up," felt that he ought to be ashamed of himself, but was too obstinate to give way.

"My mother!" he said, still angrily; "where is the value of her judgment as far as he is concerned? She loves the worthless wretch, thinks kindly of him, prays for him! Ah! I dare swear has prayed for him night and day these five-and-twenty years."

"A good woman's prayers have been worth his having, Lin. Don't grudge him them, since they have taken nothing away from *you*. I am sure if he knew, reprobate as he is, he would neither scoff at the prayers nor be ungrateful to the noble woman who, in spite of all her wrongs, could think him not past praying for. When you said once that with regard to your mother's goodness I, with the rest, was sceptical, you were right. I was. I am not now. I am sure she is a good woman. So far from reviling the man who left her, I think you can afford to pity him, seeing that in his ignorance he,

" 'Like the base Judean, threw a pearl away  
Richer than all his tribe.' "

Lin's anger-pale face cleared and lit up.

"It is awfully good of you to say that," he said gratefully, "and I know you would not say it unless you meant it. She *is* a good woman, let who may doubt it. Your goddess might preach and lay down rigid lines for other people to follow, but she would have sent three out of four men to the devil. Just look at the time! I meant to have left while the shops were still open, and here is the result—12.30! To-morrow is my mother's birthday, and I always give her something. I shall have to buy the 'something' to-morrow morning on my way to the station, and trust to it being sent home."

"What do you give her?"

"Ah! there's the puzzle! It is difficult to find anything acceptable to a woman so absolutely detached from personal possessions. For books she has little taste, while as for ornaments—I have never seen her wear anything but a little gold brooch, a sort of Maltese cross, the sight of which is an abomination to me because, I believe—mind, I only believe—that God-forsaken scoundrel gave it her."

"Pray, leave him alone."

"I can't."

"Then speak of him less savagely."

"Why? You would not have me call him a man?"



"Why not? I should like to know in what way you think of him—what shape he takes to your mental fancy."

"He has no shape. He is unreal—intangible—an uncanny, inhuman horror!—like the 'thing' in Poe's poem that is  
'neither brute nor human'

but a ghoul, or the soulless incarnation of Self in Lytton's mystic story."

"Poor devil! Who, wherever he is to-night, is just an ordinary human thing, like you and—me."

"I don't believe it. I believe that if I stood face to face with him I should know him for no 'ordinary' man. I should know him by the look in his eyes, by the very touch of his hand."

Le Quesne thought a moment, then suddenly faced about.

"So you think *that*?" he said, as, looking Lin straight in the face, he slowly—very slowly—held out his hand.

As the two hands met, one warm with vigorous young life, the other damp and chill, an odd electric shiver flashed through Lin from brow to heel, and back again. He gave himself a shake, laughing, as he did so, the slight nervous laugh of embarrassment.

"Oh, I know you think I'm a beast," he said apologetically, "and I must be for harassing you. You are as white as death, and your hand is like ice. The touch of it has sent me cold. I am sorry to go, leaving such a bad impression behind me. Never mind; when I come back I will try to make up for it."

"Stop one moment. If to-morrow is your mother's birthday, it is yours."

"Yes."

"Will you let me give you something? Oh! don't be afraid, it is nothing of any value. Only the sleeve-links that have been wherever I have been for the last thirty years. When I was young and superstitious, I always wore them when making any fresh venture, even if I were singing a new song. My 'luck' has departed. I should like to hand it on to you."

As he spoke, he took the links from his sleeves and held them out.

"Will you take your mother a message? Will you tell her that I could not send her anything but my best thanks for lending me—you? That the man who has had so much that the world counts good has come to be indebted to her for the best thing he has found in all his varied experience? I might apologise to her for monopolising you, but I am afraid my apologies now come too late to meet with any acceptance."

"I cannot take her such a mysterious message. She wouldn't understand it."

"She will understand it perfectly."

"Very well. Wire me to-morrow night just to let me know you are all right."

"If you wish it—of course I will."

Before Lin left for the North he gave his mother that "mysterious" message.

Her face flushed suddenly, a clear bright red, which as suddenly died away.

"There's the message," said Lin, busily tightening the straps of his portmanteau, "and if you can make head or tail of it, why, I can't—except, of course, that it is highly flattering to *me*. Now, when you go into my room, the first thing you have to do is to feel in the pocket of the waistcoat I took off last night."

"It was mornin', dear," she said gently.

"I expect it was. Never mind. You will find some sleeve-links in that pocket. I dare not wear them for fear of losing them. Will you put them away?"

She nodded and went upstairs as Lin left the house.

"It *was* darin' of him to send me that message," she thought to herself as she went. "He'll get too darin' if he doesn't mind. But it was good of him, too. All these years I've prayed that if ever he come to want anything done, it might be give to me to do it. Who'd have thought that ever he'd have come to be alone in the world if 'twasn't for my boy? I can scarce believe it—sometimes. 'He've come to be in debt to me for the best thing he've ever found'! For all I've suffered, I've got my reward."

Lifting Lin's waistcoat from the peg whereon it hung, she took the links from the pocket. One half-incredulous look at them, and then they were pressed to her cheek, while the tears rained down upon them thick and fast, for old acquaintance' sake. In the long ago, when they had lain against his warm brown wrists, the monogram upon them had so sorely puzzled her! Some of the delicate lines were half effaced now, the centre of each little oval plate depressed by constant use and the sharp twists of nervous, impatient fingers.

Oh! poor little worn, half-worthless, wholly-priceless things, at once so dumb and eloquent—how bitterly she cried over them as she carried them up to put them away!

## CHAPTER XXXVI

### "AFTER LONG YEARS"

A FEW days more and Lin had turned his back upon the profession he loved well for the sake of the man he loved better, without a backward look or a selfish thought of the morrow. Le Quesne and he were going to the coast.

"Not far away," Dr. Helston had said, as he gave the long-delayed permission. "Somewhere handy, so that I can run down now and then to give you a look. Brighton, if you like, or the Isle of Wight."

"The Island for preference," Le Quesne had said at once.

So Lin had written here and there, making all arrangements, looking forward with tranquil pleasure to the days they would spend together on the yacht, while the shores of the Island looked fair as a dream in the shimmering haze of the drowsy noons, and the sea lay blue by Haslar.

His patient had improved. Even under the ordeal of an operation, to which was attached little of solid hope but much of immediate comfort, he had not lost ground.

"I never meant to have had it done," he told Lin afterwards. "I never meant to have grasped at a straw for the sake of a few months' life."

One thing weighed heavily upon him—the thought of Annie. He ought to see her; he *must* see her; he had no right to go away until he had seen her. Once he had shrunk from the thought of her, had said, like Peter of old, "Lord, how can I touch this thing, seeing that it is common and unclean?" Now he saw that he had applied the contemptuous epithets to a thing far higher than himself—an unpleasant reflection and humiliating, but one which compelled him and asked him sternly what he meant to do. He could but think of her, could but marvel at her faith in him, seeing that it was a thing for which she had so little excuse! She had seen Lin turn his back upon his very living for the sake of a man whom she had every reason to mistrust and fear, and still—she held her peace.

One word from her to Lin, and all her wrongs could be avenged; but she spoke no such word. She would be of use to him; she would strive to brighten his pathway to the grave with the companionship of the son who owed him nothing save a nameless life; but of *recompense* said she never a word. Is there any wonder that as he thought of her he writhed in sheer disgust of himself? That he began to feel he must tell her how her magnificent faith in him had touched him? That in the first flush of this new gratitude, this tardy comprehension of her, he overshot the mark; and from thinking her much lower than she ever had been, he made of her something higher than she really was?

"Lin," he said abruptly one morning, "does your mother know we are going away?"

"In a general way—yes. I have not yet told her when."

"Well, seeing that we go on Monday, and here is Friday, you are rather slow, aren't you? How will you let her know?"

"Oh, I must go—if only to see the dear old man. He is very feeble, and at his age there is no certainty in things."

"But I want to see your mother myself."

"I am afraid you will have to wait," Lin said, laughing. "You would frighten her out of her wits, or make her ill for a week."

"Surely you are exaggerating her diffidence? I mean to see her, in spite of all you can say. Pass me the blotting-pad. I'll write to her now."

Half-vexed and half-amused, Lin obeyed orders. In less than five minutes the note was sealed.

"Was your correspondence always so remarkable for brevity?"

"I think more remarkable for that than anything. Oh, kindly pass that back again! I have another note to write—to Miss Le Breton. She is in London, and I had a letter from her this morning. She wants to see me."

"You will see her?" said Lin slowly.

"No. But I have some songs in MS., for which I once promised a dying lad to obtain a hearing. I have not been able to introduce them myself. I want to ask her to do it in my stead, and I want *you* to take them to her."

"Which I would much rather not do, unless you can show me good reason."

"The MS. is a sacred trust. I don't care to send it through the post."

"It would be perfectly safe with Harker."

"Perhaps. I want you to take it. I want you to know this lady. You are narrow, and must be widened for your own good."

"If that is the best reason you have for sending me, I shall decline to go. By George! you are more forgiving than I am."

"I have nothing to forgive. Miss Le Breton chose to stick to her principles rather than to me, that is all."

"That ought to be enough for you."

"It is enough—to make me respect her. You will do this for me, Lin?"

"I would rather not."

"It isn't much."

"To me—it is a great deal."

"But if I make a point of it? If I ask you to do this simply to please me?"

Lin stood, considering.

"Since you put it in that way," he said quietly, "of course, I can't refuse."

Le Quesne lay back in his chair with a satisfied smile.

"God forgive me," he thought to himself, "but it is very *life* to me to see how much I can make him do that he doesn't want to do!"

By that afternoon's post Annie received this brief communication:—

"Will you come and see me here to-morrow, at three? I will try to send Lin out of the way; but as he knows I am writing to ask you for an interview, you need fear nothing should you meet him here. In any case, I must see you. We are going away, and *one* of us may not come back."

She put the note in her pocket, and sat down to consider its contents.

"I can't say 'No' to that," she said to herself at last; "however I'll stan' havin' to face him an' yet keep hold o' myself I don't know, but I can't say 'No.' I must go. If ever I've had a heart an' he've had a place in it, I'll pray God for them two or three hours to-morrow to turn it into stone, or the sight of him'll kill me."

A glorious June afternoon, golden and cloudless without, oppressive and enervating within. With lowered blinds and windows widely opened to the air, Le Quesne sat in his big,

luxurious room alone, waiting for Annie Deane—now hoping she would come, and then hoping she would not; now telling himself that she would not refuse any request of his, and then wondering why she should comply, but ever growing more nervous and restless as the time drew nearer to the appointed hour. Five minutes to three. He rose, walked the length of the room, paused to listen to faint steps—first on the stairs, then in the passage outside—heard Harker's familiar rap at his door, wheeled round so as not to face it as it opened, heard it open and close, and knew that his visitor was awaiting his notice.

She stood just inside the big, dim room, trembling and confused. It was very dim to her, coming as she did straight from the glaring street, so dim that at first she did not see the tall figure standing within a few feet of her. But she felt its presence, and, shading her eyes, looked helplessly about her. The result was not reassuring. She felt as might some street-waif who has stumbled unawares into a church—she was oppressed by unaccustomed space, by nobility of line and detail. The brilliant pyramids of bloom and foliage, the gleam of marble limbs half-hidden by palm and fern, the glow of colour from a few perfect pictures perfectly hung, the tables and cabinets full of costly trifles, the luxury—luxury everywhere—humiliated her. She felt so cruelly out of place in that splendid room that she could have dropped into the first chair she came to, and have burst into childish tears. In the brief pause that followed the closing of the door behind her, Annie Deane went back to her girlhood, and the value of her after experiences was for the time being lost, banished into obscurity by the light from one great truth—between her and the man to whom life in a place like this was a matter of course there must ever be a gulf fixed. She was of one world—he of another. Of what avail was her nobility of mind, her laboriously-attained purity of soul! Though this man might know these things were hers, such knowledge was powerless to make of her in his eyes the one thing she had craved to be—a woman to be loved. Night after night in the long years gone had she lain awake planning in her own mind what she would say to him if they should ever again stand face to face. They stood so now, and lo! they instantly fell back into the old hopeless position. She was simply a shrinking peasant woman, with awkward manner and halting speech; he was Lindsay Le Quesne, a man

with whom she could never hope to stand on equal terms because he was a gentleman !

Growing accustomed to the subdued light, Annie became aware that he was looking at her. She put up her veil and looked at him. For one moment they met on common ground, for the thought in the minds of both was the same—they heartily pitied each other as the helpless victims of Custom exemplified by Class. If Le Quesne had desired to assume the rôle of suppliant, he had to subordinate such desire to his natural instinct of courtesy. It only remained for him to try to put his shrinking visitor at her ease.

"It was good of you to come to me," he said, making no attempt to shake hands with her, because he could see that she did not wish it. In truth, her hands were too hot to be pleasant to the touch of refinement. "I hoped you would have come without being asked, but I have waited in vain for a sign from you, and now could wait no longer. We leave on Monday."

She sat down on the chair he placed for her—stupid—speechless—wretched ; fighting hard for self-possession, fearing every second that she would burst into tears. The great opportunity of her life was within her grasp, and she saw it slipping past her unsecured. The only desire she had was the desire to get back to her own world, the world in which this man had no place. Ever gentle in his manner to women, he did not hurry her, merely explained in quiet, indifferent fashion that he had sent Lin to see an old friend of his, and to apologise for his being unable to bid her a personal farewell. He knew enough of women to know that if anything he could say could give Annie back her grip of herself it would be something concerning another woman. He was right. She found her voice.

"Why did you want to see me ?" she said quietly.

"Why, rather, did you not want to see me ?" asked he, standing at the end of the mantelpiece just beside her. It was necessary to be near her, for he had very little voice left now.

"I couldn't see as there was any need for it."

"Couldn't you ? For myself—you might well have wished to avoid me ; but what about Lin ?"

"What do you mean about Lin ?"

"You must have been anxious on his account ?"

"Not at all. Why should I be ?"

"You could not have thought him very safe with me ?"

"My Lin'd be safe with anybody. You couldn't harm him, an' I'm sure you wouldn't try."

"You have seen him turn his back upon his living for my sake?"

"Yes."

"You know that I have never made any mention of recompensing him for his sacrifice? It is a sacrifice of something more than time, of something more than money, of something more than the growing reputation which was the dearest thing in life to him. It means the liberty of his days and the loss of his rest at night, for he is a slave to me. What is he to get in return?"

"He've never said, an' I've never ast him."

"But you must have thought about it?"

She was getting back her self-possession; she spoke with even a touch of dignity:

"I haven't troubled, an' no more have he."

"Do you mean to say that, in spite of everything, you have *trusted* me?"

"I mean to say," she answered steadily, "that it have been enough for me to know that Lin have bin some good to you. As to recompense—when you sent me that message about him the other day, I had more than enough. He was the best thing as you'd found in all your life, an' God had let *me* give it you. Wusn't that enough? I thought you understood, or *why* should you ha' sent me that message?"

"I did understand. How could I know Lin and hear him talk of you without understanding? But you are different. You know nothing but bad of me, and yet you let Lin stay with me."

"If you'd bin nothink but bad," she said, with a smile, "my Lin'd never ha' took to you—nor you to him. He've not said very much about you, but what he have said have bin enough to tell me that whatever else he got from bein' with *you*, he wouldn't get no harm."

"And yet I was a devil to you!"

"You wus young, an' so wus I. God forgive us both."

He paced the room two or three times, then came back to his place by the mantelpiece, still standing behind her chair.

"How long have you known my name?"

"Since Lin was about five. I found it out accidental. I never *tried* to find it out after—just at first."

"But why, when you had found out, did you never let me know of Lin's existence? Oh, I know you had little reason to



suppose I should have troubled about it, but you might have tried me; you might have given me the chance to make you some amends. If I had not availed myself of it, that sin would have lain at my door. I suppose you thought it too forlorn a hope?"

"No, I didn't. I always believed you'd ha' done somethink for the boy if you'd knowed about him."

"Do you know that I once went down into Berkshire to make inquiries about you?"

"No; I never heard as you done that."

"I saw your sister, Mrs. Drake. She told me that the child was dead, and that you had emigrated. Why she should have charged her soul with the burden of such a lie, God knows; I don't."

Annie turned a shade or two paler.

"Alice never liked me," she said patiently. "I've had more'n one proof of that. It doesn't matter now. How long is that ago?"

"Eighteen years. If you believed that I should have owned the child, why did you not give me the chance?"

"Well, the same time as I learnt who you wus, I learnt, too, as you wus goin' to get married. To ha' come to you, *then*, would ha' bin a bitter cruel thing to do. I couldn't ha' done it."

"Most women would have done it. You know that I was *not* married?"

"I heard so, but not till some time after, when Lin was gettin' big enough to *know*."

"All the time you were working for him, did it never occur to you that you were, after all, standing in the boy's light? That you were with infinite trouble doing less for him than I could have done with no trouble at all?"

"Yes, that's true. You could ha' done better for him than me, an' I dessay I wus selfish. But if I'd only had myself to work for, work'd ha' gone harder wi' me than it did. As long as I'd got him I didn't mind; I couldn't a-bear the thought o' partin' with him."

"Do you suppose I should have asked you to part with him?"

"I couldn't ha' helped myself," she answered steadily, "no more could you. Either Lin must ha' bin your son or he must ha' bin mine. He couldn't ha' belonged to us *both*."

"Why could he not?"

"You wus one thing an' me another. A boy with his father

a gentleman an' his mother in service would scarce ha' knowed what to make of hisself, would he?"

"Do you suppose that I should have allowed the mother of my son to *be* 'in service'?"

Her pale face turned slowly scarlet.

"No," she said, "I don't, an' that's one reason why I never sent to you. It wasn't all selfishness. Don't think I'm meanin' to speak out o' place—please *don't* think that, but unless I speak plain I shan't be able to make you see why I never ast you for no help. I knowed as you'd have provided for the boy, an' I knowed as you'd have wanted to provide for me, too. How could I ha' touched your money and yet made out to myself that I wus tryin' to get back to what was right? I could only do *that* by earnin' my own livin'. It wusn't for me to hanker after you, as I *should* ha' done if we'd bin brought together agen about the boy; it wusn't for me to think any more o' you, except to pray that God would bless you and show you the wrong o' what we'd done as plain as He'd showed it to me. I wus afraid to come near you for fear o' bein' tempted; an' *that's* the truth o' why I never let you know about the boy."

He covered his face with his hands, in bitter shame and contrition. This was the thing from which he had shrunk, as a thing that was "common and unclean"!

"Oh, woman!" he burst out bitterly, "why was I too blind to see what you were years ago? I should not then have put a millstone about my neck that ever since has weighed me to the earth!"

"You couldn't ha' seen what there wusn't to see," she said, a trifle bitterly too. "I wus what you took me for then—nothink better. All I knows I've learnt since. P'raps the burden you've carried have made you a better man, as mine have made me a better woman. It have made me think o' many things. It wus just their tellin' me as I was a ruined woman that made me determined to show I wusn't—that. If God had told me I wus, I'd have abided by what He said; but He doesn't—anywhere. It's men that is merciless—not Him. So I went by what He said, an' not by what they said; an' as long as I can answer for myself to Him, they are welcome to say an' to think what they likes."

"A ruined woman!" he repeated wearily. "You were a child. It was my sin—not yours."

She shook her head in her old obstinate way.

"I've thought about that too, an' I'd like to ease your mind

about it, if I can. You wus but a boy, and I, in my ignorance, tempted you in a way I didn't understand. Don't think bad of me for sayin' this—it's true. I didn't see it then ; I've seen it since."

"Your very ignorance should have protected you."

"Wus you to know it for that?" she said. "I've seen ignorance an' fastness look pretty much alike, an' when I've thought o' bringin' up girls, I've thought as it's most as dangerous to let them know too little as 'tis to let them know too much."

"You are divinely merciful to me, Annie."

"I want you to be happy about me," she said gently ; "to put me off your mind. I don't suppose as we'll ever see each other agen (there won't be no need, an' it might make Lin suspicious), so what I've got to say I must say now. I've never blamed you in my heart for what I had to bear. I don't want you to think I've had a hard life just becos' o' you, for that isn't true. Tho' it's bin a hard-workin' life, *that* I'd ha' had in any case, so you can't be to blame for that ; tho' I've had little in the way o' pleasure, I've had Lin, an' he've made up for it ; tho' I've bin what's known as a ruined woman, I haven't suffered, after all, so very much on account of it. I think people have respected me becos' I never hid nothink. It's years now since anyone flung my sin in my teeth. I've kep' myself to myself, an' if ev'ry woman like me did that she'd find she needn't be a mark for stones. After all, I've not bin unhappy. I've done my best, and God has prospered me. So, as I says, I don't see why you should reproach yourself becos' o' me. You couldn't have done any better for me than I've done for myself, an' if Lin'd bin brought up in too much comfort it might ha' spoilt him for bein' any good."

"I grant you that. He has done far better with you than he would have done with me ; but do you expect me to get any consolation out of that unpalatable truth ? He is your son, not mine ; he owes you everything—me nothing but a bitter wrong."

"It is too late to trouble about that," she said ; "so it's better to try an' forget it. An' yet it's about that as I have somethink to say. I'll say it now, for the time's goin', an' I want to be away from here when Lin comes back. You've bin kind enough to say as you feels in debt to me—"

"Very heavily, Annie, with no chance of ever getting out."

"I've never ast nothink for myself, an' this isn't for myself that I'm goin' to ast now, altho', if it isn't granted me, I'll be

heavier punished than anybody, for it'll be all the fault o' my blunderin'. I wants to beg of you one great favour. Lin's young, an' it wouldn't be fair to make him suffer for me—"

"One moment," Le Quesne interposed hastily; "let it never be said that you had to ask for such poor amends as I can make you through Lin. He is my son, and all I have is his. Directly I knew him for mine, I altered my will in his favour."

She started up and drew back from him, for in his eagerness he had lain his hand on her shoulder.

"Oh!" she cried, in piteous reproach, "did you think I meant *that*? Whatever have I done or said as could have made you mistake me like that? It never come into my head to think o' such a thing—"

"I'm very sorry," he said humbly; "I'm *very* sorry. God knows I have mistaken you enough. I seem fated to mistake you to the end. No, no—don't cry! When I think of all the tears you have shed through me, I feel the most contemptible hound alive."

She struggled a moment with the choking at her throat, and conquered it.

"It's this I meant. I somehow blundered over tellin' Lin about you, an' I've never bin able to undo what I done then. If you've ever spoke to him about the man what wus his father, you'll know what I mean."

"I have spoken about the man."

"You found Lin bitter an' hard?"

"Very bitter and very hard."

"You can see as there's no turnin' him?"

"I won't say that. He has an exaggerated, mistaken idea of the man. To him he is not 'man' at all. Some day he will know who he was, and then he will be sorry for having judged him too harshly."

"I want you to promise me you'll never tell him."

"Oh, why? I have always meant to tell him—presently."

"I thought so, because o' the darin' messages you've sent me. They've turned me sick with fear." She got up again and faced him. "Is Lin dear to you?"

"Something more than dear to me."

"Would it hurt you to lose him?"

"I shall not lose him. Nothing I could do or say could make any difference between us now. I have been very cautious; I have waited until I was sure of him, but now I *am* sure, and I must tell him the truth. I want to stand face

to face with him in honest reconciliation before I die, if it is only for an hour. When I hear him speak of the man who gave him life as a God-forsaken cur outside the pale of humanity, what do you think I feel like, knowing that man for myself?"

"Let him speak as he likes, an' try not to mind it. How can I make you see how much better I knows my Lin than you do? In most things he's more o' you about him than he have o' me. From the time he wus but a baby there wus that in him as stamped him for a bettermost class; but in one thing he's mine—he's that obs'nate when he gets a thing in his head, you can't turn him. I crossed him once over the life he'd planned for hisself, an' at the end o' four years it was me what had to give in; *he* didn't. An' I don't think as he've seen since that he wus hard. No, he'd got right on his side, an' he felt justified in stickin' to it; I wus wrong—well, if I had to suffer for it, he'd think that on'y fair."

"You are making him out to be cruel."

"He *can* be cruel. I think people what have never been tempted can. It's on'y them as have made mistakes their-selves as can be merciful to others. And my Lin is hard. He's good an' kind, but he's *just*, an' I've often noticed that just people forgets mercy."

"He is, above everything, affectionate. Tender-hearted and tender-handed as any girl!"

"Yes, but before he loves a thing he'll satisfy hisself as it's worth lovin'; an', on'y let him find it isn't, an' he'll turn his back on it. It might be terrible hard to do, but if it broke his heart, he'd do it."

"He won't turn his back upon me. I know it will be a terrible shock for him to have to connect me with that man he loathes; but Lin's love for me will stand a heavier blow than that. Sooner or later he will say, 'Since it was you who were the sinner—well, let the sin go hang!'"

She went closer, and gave his arm a shaky touch.

"Sooner or later, p'raps—yes. But can you give him what I give him? Have you got four long years to wait while he comes round? I'd slaved for him since he wus a baby; I'd lived ev'ry minute o' my life for him, an' denied myself even a bit o' dainty food to save it for him; we wus everythink to each other for sixteen years. Then I made one mistake an' went agenst him, and what did he do? Day after day he slunk out o' the house an' never looked at me; evenin' after evenin' he slunk in agen, with his shoulder lifted between his face an'

mine; night after night he crep' away to bed an' took no more notice o' me than if I'd bin a dog, until I thought the very heart in me would ha' broke. An' when he was most too ill to drag hisself to an' from the office he'd lock his bedroom door rather than I should go in to see if I could do anything for him."

"Poor soul!" with a compassionate smile at her, "that was hard on you. Some day I will make him ashamed of it."

"*You* make him? Can't you see that if he'd treat me like that when he knew what he'd bin to me for twenty years, he wouldn't be likely to consider you, who, till scarce three months ago, did very well without him?"

"That is a reasonable argument, but you must not think me cruel when I say that I have a grip of Lin, the strength of which you cannot understand. I believe him to be so devoted to me that if he thought his life could save mine he would give it to me like a shot! And yet you think that he would turn me adrift for a thing which happened five-and-twenty years ago? No, no; I know him better than that."

She turned away, and lifted her hand with a gesture of despair.

"It isn't much to ast," she said drearily, "an' it's for your own sake; but if you won't believe me, I can't help it. Still, it do look hard that you should go agenst me when it seems to me that God have blinded Lin, in answer to my prayers, to send you some one as cares for you."

"But what is it you want me to do? Leave my will to tell him the truth when I am gone?"

"Let nothing *ever* tell him the truth," she burst out with unusual vehemence. "As for your money, if once he was to know it for yours, he'd starve rather than touch a penny of it! Sure there's plenty o' your own folks as you could leave that to. Leave Lin somethink if you feels it just, but not enough to make him wonder why you should forget everybody for him. That might open his eyes."

"I choose to leave all I have to my son. if he chooses to pitch it into the street, I shall be none the wiser."

"An' you won't promise me? Think of the dread I'll live in while you're away. Every day'll seem like two. *Do* promise me!"

He only stood upright, looking at her very earnestly, depriving her of her hard-won calmness, until she shook like a leaf, and could bear the silence no longer.

"If you won't promise me," she said hurriedly, "it's no use stoppin' here. I'll go before Lin comes back. At least, I'll

never help him to find out what he'd best not know. Good—good-bye.”

He took no notice of the tremulously-spoken word, only continued to look at her, kindly but thoughtfully, as if he were trying to fathom something which puzzled him.

“Good-bye,” repeated she more tremulously still.

“Is that all?”

“I—I—think so, unless it is I'd like to say ‘God bless you!’”

“Or—God forgive me—which? Well, since you have, perhaps He has. No, I can't let you go for a minute, I have something to say to you.”

“Hadn't you better leave it?” she faltered desperately, for she was afraid of him and afraid of herself. “You're not fit to stan' here talkin' to me—you look a lot too ill.”

He passed her then, and sitting down on a couch, leaned forward with his face hidden in his hands.

“Annie!”

She crossed the room, standing near him, her heart breaking over him, her hands twisted in the folds of her gown. Long years of drudgery had not killed her womanly instincts. She loved this man as few women know how to love. With supreme forgetfulness of self, and still with just enough of it to make her feel she would give her life to touch him! And that—she might not do.

“Annie!”

She shivered, but did not speak.

“To do Lin justice is an easy matter, but that will not touch you. Is there anything I can do to make you happier?”

“What I've told you. That'd make me very happy, an' that you won't do.”

“Leave that out. Is there nothing—then?”

“Nothink at all. I'm very comftable now, an' as for bein' hard worked—why, if it wasn't for me bein' a good hand wi' my needle, I'd find the time hang heavy on my hands.”

He stretched out his hand, and drew her closer to him. She did not resist, only twisted her fingers tighter than ever in the folds of her gown, until her nerves from palm to shoulder were one tingling network of pain.

“Annie, if through all these years you have clung to a scrap of faith in me, you must have loved me, too?”

She neither acknowledged nor denied it.

“Tell me the truth. Faithfulness, even to a worthless thing, is nothing to be ashamed of.”

"I'm not ashamed of it, but I—don't—think—it's your business to ask—me—*this*."

"I think it is. I don't want to be impertinent, but I want to know."

She held her peace, wondering if he could fail to hear how cruelly her heart was beating; she could hear it herself.

"Somehow, I think if you had ceased to care for me you would tell me so; but my knowledge of women is very limited, and I may be wrong. Looking at you just now, I thought of something which quite recently came under my notice. A man I knew very well was once engaged to a lady I also knew; but he disappointed her, and she declined to marry him. They never met again, though neither ever married; but more than eighteen years after, she heard that all was up with him—that he was dying. She travelled in haste from America to London (*he* was in London), and then she wrote to him, asking—it seems to me—a singular favour. With an earnestness the sincerity of which I—*he*—could not doubt, she begged to be allowed to go to him—to stay with him—that whatever loving service could do for him might be done by her alone, until Death should render even that of no avail. As I say, it seemed to me an odd request; but then, you see, I am not a woman. Was it odd? You are a woman, and will know."

"Why should you think it odd?"

"It couldn't be very pleasant to watch a thing you love die by inches—like a rat in a trap."

"No—it couldn't be pleasant, as—you—say."

"Could any woman *wish* to add such a thing to her experience?"

"I—don't—know."

"You would not care to add it to yours?"

"I—can't—say."

He smiled, and, leaning a little forward, rested his forehead against the beating heart which told him the pitiful truth.

"Annie, would you like to stay with me? I may be a lot of trouble to you; but I don't think you would mind, and it could not be for long."

The folds of her dress fell away from one of her clenched hands.

"Don't tell me any heroic lie. I can look at you and find out the truth for myself."

Her other hand released itself and stole up to his shoulder.

"No one shall know but Lin. Will you marry me?"

The heart against his forehead beat very heavily now, while



two trembling hands stroked his hair tenderly—very tenderly, but with a tenderness quite devoid of passion.

"Annie, will you marry me?"

"No, my dear," she said at last, with decisive brevity, "I won't."

"Why? because of Lin? He will forgive me—then."

"No, not becoss o' Lin. If it wus possible for you to wish it—"

"I *do* wish it."

"If it wus possible," she went on, unheeding, "for you ever to care for me, it'd be a diff'rent thing; but it isn't, and I'm not so foolish as to think it is. It's all very well now for half an hour, while you feels as if you must move heaven an' earth to make me some amends; but that's only a flash, an' I couldn't take advantage of it. If I said 'Yes,' you'd feel that the sooner death come an' put an' end to things the better, if 'twas on'y to take you away from me. You'd be like a gen'rous-hearted child who'd give away all he'd got, an' wus like to fret his heart out that he wus too proud to ast for it back. Give you a fair chance, an' you've got some time to live—I go by what Lin tells me. Tie you to me, an' you takes that chance away. Do you think I've loved you for five-an'-twenty years on'y to do you such a bad turn as that? No, my dear, no—*no*!"

He did not speak, and she went on:

"You take my Lin as a gift from me, an' thankful am I that I've anythink to give you as it's worth your while to have. He can do for you as I couldn't—he's more o' your sort. Why, do you think I don't feel as the very way I talks would fidget you? Do you think I don't *know* that the best as I could do for you'd only try your patience? It isn't your fault, an' I don't think it's mine. Oil an' water can't help it that they wusn't meant to mix. My hands isn't fit to touch *you*. Anyone that's ill don't get a fair chance onless they have about them a voice an' a touch as is dear to them an' welcome. I wish mine could be dear to you, but they can't, an' to ast you to suffer them to please me'd be cruel. You've made me that happy an' grateful, you can't think! That I should ever have lived to hear you say this to me seems most too good to be true; but I can't take you at your word—it wouldn't be fair to neither of us. I'm quite contented, so—you take my Lin, an' let—me—go."

She shut the gates upon her glimpse of Paradise as she said those words; but she did so bravely, honestly feeling that Paradise was not for her. Lifting his head from where it had rested, she gave him one long, pitiful, passionless kiss,

and turned from him swiftly lest he might detain her. Well was it for her that the movement was swift, for already the door had opened to admit Lin.

Something unusual in the expression of his face, something neither suspicious nor puzzled, but yet akin to both, struck Annie on the instant. An adept in the art of concealment, she stood in front of the bowed figure on the couch, and looked Lin straight in the eyes placidly.

"I got afraid to leave before you come back," she said. "Mr. Le Quesne's tired, an' the heat's so tryin'! Please don't get up"—turning half round, but still looking at Lin—"Lin will see me out. I half forget the way."

"That will give you time to get round," she thought, as she followed her son downstairs. "I'll keep him a minute or two—talkin'."

She *did* keep him, perhaps five minutes; but Lin still looked pre-occupied, and instead of clearing the stairs at two or three springs on his return to Le Quesne, he took the stairs one at a time—deliberately.

"I must be mad," muttered he to himself, as he paused at the top; "and yet I *swear* I was not mistaken! She stood close to him, bending over him as many a time she has bent over me; and if she didn't say 'You take my Lin, and let me go,' I never heard her say anything in my life!"

## CHAPTER XXXVII

### DESERTED

LIN found the drawing-room tenantless, and presently, growing anxious, went to see if all were right with Le Quesne. He found him lying down.

"Anything wrong?" he said quickly.

"No. It is cooler here than in front of the house. Did you see Miss Le Breton?"

"I did. I found her the reverse of all I expected to find her, except in the matter of personal appearance. Kindly allow me to avow my absolute belief in your goddess."

"Exactly. I knew you had only to see her to be converted, but I did *not* know whether you would own your conversion."

"I expected to find her statuesque and stand-offish. Instead of which I found her nervous, and if not exactly flurried in manner, certainly not self-possessed."

"Then she has altered."

"Yes? But for the absurdity of the thing, I should say I frightened her. I was shown in to her, and she forthwith caught at the nearest chair, and stood looking at me as one might look at the risen dead. I was getting uncomfortable, when she recovered herself and apologised. She said I was so like someone she had once known that for the moment I had startled her."

"I think you are generally supposed to be like—*me*."

"And I am sure you have heard me say that I fail to see much resemblance. Anyway, I am not sufficiently like you to frighten any one."

Le Quesne made no reply. "It seems to me that God have blinded him," Annie had said scarcely an hour before. Surely she was right? Perhaps it is but characteristic of human perversity that the man who had so much to gain by that blindness had never felt so inclined to enlighten it as he did now.

Lin, taking mental note of his weary face, thought he was tired, and having done what he could to make him comfortable, went back to the drawing-room and settled down with a book

But he was not an attentive reader at the best of times, and now could not read at all. He found himself thinking of his mother, of the self-possession displayed by her in that room only a short time before, a self-possession so foreign to her intercourse with strangers that Lin was compelled to notice it, and to think it peculiar.

"She wasn't a bit like herself," he thought, as he let his book slip to the floor. "No man would have taken her for a painfully shy woman. I suppose she has grown so used to thinking of him in connection with me that he scarcely seems like a stranger now. Besides, that worn, pale face of his is sure to have gone straight to the little woman's heart. I wish she had understood it is bad form to be demonstrative. Hang it! I never knew her to *be* that—before."

The colour came into his face here, for any young fellow who values his womankind is ever jealous of their dignity, and Annie's was not of the order which may venture to unbend and yet be fearless of suspicion.

It was growing dark when the door between the two rooms opened, and Le Quesne came through.

"Had a good rest?" said Lin, starting up. "I must be getting fearfully lazy; I was half asleep."

"I have not been asleep; I have been thinking. Thought and sleep are enemies."

"Had I known I should have turned you out. What on earth had you to think about? Oh, I say, I've been thinking too. Did my mother preach to you to-day?"

"Why do you ask me that?"

"Because I never knew her conquer her natural diffidence unless some one had started her on the subject of religion, and because she has made you so uncommonly—quiet."

"No, she did not preach to me, and if she had, I should have been a reverent listener, for I am sure she is far more fit to preach than many people who do."

"But which of you talked?" said Lin, in mingled curiosity and amusement, "you—or she? For the life of me, I can't imagine her having pluck enough to say much to you!"

"I think she said more than I did. We had much to talk of, notably—you."

"I might have known it! Like the man in the 'School for Scandal,' I should have said when I went out—'I go, and leave my character behind me.'"

Le Quesne failed to be in harmony with Lin's bantering tone and manner.

"We were speaking of your earlier life," he said slowly, "of those unhappy days of misunderstanding between you. You ought to have made wider allowance for her prejudices in those times, Lin, seeing what a model of devotion she has been to you."

Lin's bantering manner changed at once. While acknowledging that devotion with all possible heartiness, he yet failed to appreciate the fact of his mother having made of it the *motif* of a conversation with Mr. Le Quesne.

"I am not likely to forget her devotion to me," he said quietly; "but it is very unlike her to talk of it."

Le Quesne saw that he had blundered.

"She made no parade of it," he said hastily, "but she is so transparent! One could not talk to her for five minutes without understanding that you are all she has had to live for."

Now Lin knew that as well as anyone, or better; but he was not in the humour to have it thrown up at him.

"I have not attempted to deny it," he said, a trifle curtly. "Upon my word, I can't see why she should have complained of me to you in this way."

"She did not complain. It isn't in her to do it."

"She has evidently made you think ~~we~~ might do so with justice, or why should you commence by telling me that I ought to have made wider allowance for her prejudices? I confess myself to be immensely surprised at her coming here and talking to you in this confidential way."

"Don't be unreasonable. I sent for your mother because I am personally accountable to her for your suspended career. It was necessary that I should discuss matters with her."

"I don't think so. My career is my affair. I suspend it as I take it up again—independently of anyone. I shall not go to my mother to cover—deficiencies; so for you to discuss matters with her was *not* necessary at all. I know perfectly well what it led to. She has never forgotten the wretched years I sacrificed to her—prejudices, and she has never ceased to chafe at my inability to confess myself in the wrong. She misunderstood me; she had power to coerce me, and she used it to its limit. I resented it then, and I resent it now; I am not going to outrage my sense of honesty by pretending that I don't."

"And yet she had done so much for you, and she thought she was right."

"I had done as much for myself, and I knew she was wrong."

It is hard to have one's dearest hopes made light of—ignored—by those who ought to understand one best. That makes one bitter. I daresay that I, in my boyish way, was extravagantly harsh, but I felt the injury was one which justified me in being so. I don't expect you to see this, because other people's injuries can always be borne with fortitude—not to say with cheerfulness. We won't discuss the matter. Why my mother should rake up that old grievance—I don't know. It has long since been happily shelved."

"She did not rake it up, but she may have wondered why you do for me voluntarily what you only did for her under coercion."

"It is a different thing," said Lin hastily. "I was all untried then, denied my chance, given no choice, forced into something uncongenial, to pander to a selfish whim. Now, I know what I am worth; I give up nothing but a little time. I take up my life again when I choose, pretty sure of a kind reception. Where is the comparison?"

"A woman would make one. She understands motives less than actions. What is my desire for your society but a 'selfish whim'? Yet you would not like to hear it sneered at for that."

"What is the matter with you?" laughed Lin indulgently. "Let us have lights, and be cheerful. I can quite see how my mother and you amused yourselves this afternoon. You laid me on a table and, metaphorically, dissected me. Under her guidance you found me suffering from a disease known as 'hardness of heart,' 'inability to assimilate injury'—how shall I find a name for it? Never mind, it doesn't matter. She lamented over my condition, and you undertook to cure me. Is that the truth?"

"Somewhere near it. You are resentful, and intolerant; that is, you profess to be. I think there is more of profession in it than reality, though. It is so out of keeping with the rest of your character that it jars upon me like a false note. There is little wonder if your mother grieves over it."

"You want me exactly to pattern? Now, I take it that is the reason why so many excellent people are disappointed in others. They expect consistency, and they don't get it. Man is neither god nor devil. He is a mixture, sometimes of extremes, but nearly always of opposites. I once knew a man who was ultra-conscientious in his dealings with men, but who could no more resist making a woman believe in him and then 'riding away' than he could resist eating his dinner when it

was set before him. Also I knew another man who, though fool enough to drink away his health and gamble away his substance, yet never touched the money left him in trust for his imbecile brother, and steadily refused to marry the girl who had stuck to him through thick and thin, not because the poor devil didn't want to, for he loved her, but because he honestly felt he wasn't—*fit*! No, it is of no use; we are not according to line and rule. I have sometimes thought that we are all like a puzzle, only to be fitted together by the Hand which designed us."

"Stop a minute, Lin, and never mind the lamps. Do you know what you said just now? I am going to hold you to it. 'Man is neither god nor devil; he is a mixture of extremes.' Surely I heard you say that?"

"Yes, and I believe it."

"Yet in speaking of a man once you called him a 'God-forsaken hound,' outside the pale of humanity."

Lin dropped the match he had struck into an ash-tray, and watched it burn out.

"Outside the pale of humanity," repeated he, "therefore not to be judged by ordinary human laws. When I said what I did I was speaking of the men one meets every day, not of—criminals."

"Yet are even they God-created, as we are."

"Well, I think they are His business, not ours. I am not speaking irreverently. You can't deny that there are men whose record, handed down to posterity, contains no one thing which is good. Would you like to undertake the white-washing of, say, Judas Iscariot?"

Le Quesne sat forward in his chair and spoke with such desperate earnestness that Lin was startled.

"Well, even for him I will be daring enough to put forward a plea. Do you think he did what he did knowingly? That he *believed* in the Man he betrayed? Of a certainty—no, or he had never dared. Sheer reverence had saved him from lifting his vile hand against a thing so awful! He sinned in unbelieving ignorance."

"Even allowing that, he foully betrayed another—man. Does that whitewash him?"

"No, but that has been done many times since in cold blood, and unaccompanied by universal execration. Of that part of his sin, too, did Judas bitterly repent. He is, I believe, the only man in the whole of that sacred record of whom it can be said that repentance availed him nothing."

Lin, leaning against the mantelpiece, watched the light from a glorious full moon creep steadily along the floor. He suddenly stood upright, and turned towards Le Quesne.

"Surely you and my mother did not speak of the man of whom I told you?"

"We did."

"How very extraordinary!"

"Not at all. I am a privileged person, and your mother is — your mother."

"Who spoke of him first?"

"I cannot quite say."

"I wish you could. I don't like to think of it being her, and I would rather that she had not known I told you anything about him."

"She does know. It was in connection with this that your curious implacability came under discussion. You know it is a trouble to her."

"I know she chooses to make a trouble of it. I cannot see why."

"I promised her to try to convert you."

"I am surprised you should have done that."

"You may presently cease to be surprised. Your mother has done her best, and failed. I am going to do my best, and if I fail, we shall only be where we were before. I believe you would do more for me than for anyone else. Is that a delusion, or is it not?"

"It is a simple truth," said Lin, but he said it irritably, as if he wished that the question had not been asked.

"Can you account for it being so?"

"No. A man's personal likes and dislikes are beyond his control—they are involuntary. In that he likes or dislikes, he obeys something entirely outside himself."

"Yes, you proved that to-day, when you went on a distasteful errand to please me, having first made up your mind to detest the lady whose acquaintance I wished you to make. You came back confessing yourself all wrong. Had I let you alone you would have remained in the wrong, and have forfeited the chance of a friendship which will hereafter be of service to you. For you will be friends, I am sure of it."

"Very well," assented Lin cheerfully, "we will allow that I made a mistake *there*. A man cannot do more than own himself in the wrong, can he?"

"Yes. He can try to right the wrong, and be a better man in the effort. You disliked Miss Le Breton for want of know-



ing her. The other hatred you hug so closely is no worthier of you, as I see you. You know nothing of that man outside this one episode in his life. Of his temptations before, of his repentance afterwards, you would refuse to hear if anyone could prove to you beyond doubt that he was tempted, and that he did repent. Is that manly, Lin—is that just?"

"Why should I be so scrupulous to extend the full measure of manliness and justice to a man who showed himself to be possessed of neither?"

"Because I ask you. After to-night I will not trouble you about this one way or the other. You shall decide, and I will accept your decision."

"If I could see why you should make a point of it, I might try to put the whole thing out of my mind as far as possible."

"That will not do. You are good enough to say that you care for me more than for any one on earth, and God knows that you have shown you do without talking about it. You have put self behind you once for my sake; now put self behind you again, and grant me charity for—that man."

"Good heavens! this is no question of *self*! My feeling for that man is outside me, or any will of mine. Can you not see that?"

"I cannot, nor can I believe it. Lin, I shall not ask of you many more sacrifices."

Lin sat down on the arm of the big chair, resting his own arm lightly on Le Quesne's shoulders.

"Ask of me anything in the way of reasonable service, and I will not refuse you. This is a question of principle. Surely you will allow that there are things which, before a man could forgive, he would have ceased to be a man? This is one of them."

"Your pride says that; your obstinacy tells you to stick to it. If I could break down your pride and your obstinacy, from the *heart* of you I should get a worthier answer."

"My pride has nothing to do with it. Why agitate yourself and harass me by harping upon a thing which can make no difference to either of us?"

Lin spoke earnestly, but he spoke, too, with studied gentleness. He could only suppose this to be the whim of a man who, enfeebled by illness, had become exacting, fixing his mind upon a trivial thing only desirable because out of easy reach.

"Come, let it go," he said. "If I had known that my mother was going to infect you with her little 'craze,' I should have kept you apart."

Le Quesne put up a hand to grasp Lin's. Thus encircling himself, as it were, with the strong young arm, he leaned back heavily against it. He liked to feel it there, to reflect that as yet he had said nothing to scare that gentle touch away.

"Your mother did not infect me. I said just now I promised her to convert you. That is not true. I promised myself, but she implored me to leave you alone."

"She was sensible. She could not see why you should trouble to plead this man's cause with me."

"Indeed she could."

Lin shifted his position uneasily. He would have risen, but that the hand he held tightened upon his.

"Can you show me—why?"

"Because I knew the man."

"You *knew* the man? Well, that should have raised him, seeing that it could not lower you, but it does not explain why you should plead his cause."

"I plead it because the time is coming when you will know him too, for he has watched you longingly from a distance, and wishes to be friends."

Again Lin tried to get away, and again the hand closed over his own with a clasp which might not be shaken off without force.

"I plead his cause because, indeed, he is not the God-forsaken cur you make of him, but such a man as you say one meets with every day, neither all good nor all bad, but a mixture of both; a man who, looking at your mother and at you, feels himself not good enough to be admitted and forgiven, and yet not bad enough to be thrust out and stoned."

Rigid and chill, Lin sat and watched the pale light creep along the floor, watched his shadow lose itself in Le Quesne's shadow, until the shape of each was swallowed up and lost. And he shuddered, as at a half-forgotten dream, which even the light of day has not the power to strip of *all* its terror. The evening breeze, coming freshly through the open windows, stirred the big palms with a sound like that of a pitying sigh. Why did his thoughts travel back to that holiday of his childhood, to the hush of the dark pine-wood, to the splendour of a summer sunset, and the shadow of a man upon the reddened turf? He did not know, but he felt his heart within him sink, while there dawned upon him a conviction that he was passing into a fresh phase of existence, in which there would be something missing, something which had made life dear to him, but what—he could not tell. He tried to speak, or

thought he tried, and then desisted for lack of will. Whatever he said would only help him to acquire a knowledge he desired to shun, and that knowledge was already all too close at hand. So he sat there dumb, feeling nothing but the clutch of nervous fingers about his wrist, hearing nothing but the hoarse, pathetic voice, at once so full of self-repression and of fear.

"I plead his cause because his time is very short ; because the shafts of misfortune have struck him so thickly and so often that they have left him with but one spot vulnerable to mortal hand, and that to no hand but your own. To all but your contempt—to every loss but the loss of you, he is ready to submit, but—no—no— Lin, hear me out ; don't take your hand away ! Put it and the other about my neck, and wring the life out of me if you will ; but as long as you leave me a life to live, for the love of God, be merciful to me !"

Lin rose to his feet, but could not get away. His arm, pinned by Le Quesne's weight against the back of the chair, seemed at once alive with the horror of loathsome contact, and paralysed for all voluntary movement. He remembered the ghastly, sickening pain of those crushed nerves to the end of his life.

"I can't believe my senses," he said slowly at last, in a dull, strained voice that bore no likeness to his own. "Are *you* the man ?"

"I *am* the man."

And the night wind, stirring again through the palm-leaves, touched Lin's white face, whispering softly, "Pity him ! Pity him !"

. . . . .

"Oh ! my good God ! How *horrible* !"

It was the first thing he said after the swirling wave of outraged feeling, passing, had left him master of his steadying senses. In his brain two shadowy figures were struggling to become one—the demon-figure of his mother's seducer, and that, half human, half divine, of the man who had seemed to him the noblest and most lovable thing on earth. He could not reconcile them—it was like trying to reconcile God and devil ; they would not mix. He turned and looked at the still figure lying in the shelter of his tortured arm. How still it lay, yet how convulsively the hand clutched his own—with a grip like that of death ! He tried again to free himself, but the clinging hand was still the stronger, and would not let his go. He desisted and stood—looking—thinking—disentangling—remembering—until the last vestige of doubt had vanished,

and the two brain-images melted into one, united for ever by a memory significant as it was sickening—the memory of his own likeness to Le Quesne. He had often smiled at it; he did not smile at it now; it maddened him.

"Let go my hand," he said sternly. "I am *like* you, as they say, and if I think of what that *means*, I shall be tempted to strike the likeness out of one of us; there is no reason why it should be you."

The demand was instantly complied with. Lin drew away his arm and stood a few paces off against the wall. His heart was on fire; his brain was in a whirl; also, his pride was in revolt, as it had been in the old days at the office. He had been disposed of in the dark, his most sacred feelings made light of and ignored. This man and his mother had made a dupe of him. By Heaven, they should suffer for it!

"Great God!" he burst out savagely, "what have I done that my mother and you should dare to play me such a sorry trick as this?"

"I may have played you what you call a 'trick.' She has had no share in it."

"She let me meet you without warning; she has seen me make a friend of you, knowing well that I would have cut off my hand rather than have offered it to *you* in friendship."

"That is true; but she had no desire to 'trick' you. She wished to see peace between us."

"She wished an impossibility, alike for her own sake and mine. But where you are concerned, wrong is her right, I think. Only to-day, had I not been the blindest fool alive, I should have seen that she and you were far too intimate to be fresh acquaintances, and far too intimate to be—honourable. But when I saw her standing close to you, bending over you, I gave my eyes the lie rather than think her not above suspicion."

Le Quesne rose from his chair and stood leaning on the back of it.

"Until to-day I had not spoken to your mother for five-and-twenty years—nor since I have known you has there been any sort of communication between us. I have been ashamed to look her in the face, and she has been too generous to ask me to do so. But to-day I sent for her, and she came. She told me she should not come again, because of her dread of arousing in you any suspicion of the truth. She begged me not to make you any confession, she was so sure that if I did you would have none of me. I wanted her to come to me. to

be my wife for whatever of time remains to me, but she refused. Yes, she *did* stand close to me, she *did* bend over me, like the sweet, compassionate woman that she is. There is the truth, I hope she will not suffer in your eyes for my having told it. That you should suspect me is natural; that you should suspect her is not only *un-natural*, it is impertinent."

Unhinged and passion-blinded as he was, Lin shrank.

"I beg your pardon," he said; "I have brought her very low in that I have submitted her to the indignity of being defended by *you*."

Le Quesne's pale lips twitched and his eyes filled.

"Lin," he said gently, "words break no bones, they say, but words like yours can break hearts, and mine is a sorry mark for you; let it alone. I deserve all you can say of me, and more; but there is one recollection which I hope to take down to the grave with me untouched, and that is the recollection of your kindness. If kindness between us is no longer possible, then at least there shall be nothing else."

"Kindness! Where was your kindness when you made yourself so dear to me that nothing else in life had any hold upon me, only to tell me *this*? I say it is a devilish trick, just such a heartless thing as one might expect from the man who could act as you did years ago. If there had been a spark of honour in you, you would have warned me away from you at first."

"I did not seek your friendship, nor had I any idea of your connection with me until things had gone too far to admit of our drifting back into mere acquaintances. I had no idea that there lived a man for whose existence I was responsible. I wish I had *had* such an idea. You would have had less to reproach me with than you have now."

Lin did not immediately answer. Passion was dying down in him. He had believed in the man so utterly—he was so willing to believe in him still.

"Oh!" he said, wretchedly, after a long pause, "if there is any loophole of escape for you, show it to me. You know what I have heard—is it *all* true, or has it been distorted into something worse than it was? Most stories of this sort have two sides. If this has, show it me from yours."

"It has no other side. I can only say that, like Judas, I betrayed a thing to the divinity of which I was blind. I saw no reason to think it sacred. No, Lin, there is no loophole by which I may escape. Only the love which shuts its eyes to the sin for the sake of the sinner can avail me anything."

"Did you never go back to that village? never make any inquiry? never move a hand to find out if that girl were living or dead—or—*worse* than dead?"

"I went back once—five years after. Deserted myself, I bethought me of the girl I had deserted. I tried to find her out."

"You *did* go, then? You *did* try to find her?"

The piteous eagerness of that question touched Le Quesne as nothing had touched him yet. Lin saw a loophole, and was trying to widen it for him.

"I did. I saw her sister—Mrs. Drake. She told me the girl had emigrated, and that the child was dead."

"That was a double lie, as you might easily have proved."

"Yes. I proved nothing. I was satisfied, and made no further inquiry."

"Not of her parents—not of anyone else likely to know?"

"Not of a living soul. I saw no reason."

Lin abandoned the loophole as hopeless.

"You were easily satisfied," he said, "so easily that I think if I were you I would never mention that poor attempt at reparation, never pretend—even to myself—that I made one."

"Very well. We will say none *was* made. We will wipe it out. I did—nothing."

"As I see things—you did nothing. This makes your story of repentance the merest clap-trap, in which no man could believe if he tried. For more than twenty years you had a glorious life of it. Ease—luxury—popularity and success such as fall to the lot of one man in ten thousand! And then you talk of hardship! To me it seems that Retribution has overtaken you very slowly. I don't think you have any right to plead your cause with my mother's son as that of a man who has suffered."

"Very well. We will say I have suffered—nothing. I have been a very millionaire in luck, and love, and happiness."

"While she has been a beggar in all three."

"In neither, Lin. She has had *you*."

"Well, I have been something—something to be slaved for, something to keep the sin of her youth well before the eyes of all men. Put yourself in her place, and see if you would have looked upon me in the light of a—compensation! I doubt it. Put yourself in her place? As if you could! What do you know of the life of a servant, beyond the fact that if you ring a bell, one will answer it? I know what her life has been. I wish I could bring it home to you:—A patient

drudge in an underground kitchen—up early and to bed late ; for years at the beck and call of a selfish old she slave-driver, who used her misfortune as a means of extorting from her work enough for two ; too honest to touch a bit of the plainest food without permission ; too proud to ask for what was not given readily ; her one pleasure to have me with her from Saturday to Monday. One of my earliest recollections is of getting up when she did in the dark of bitter winter mornings, of being wrapped in an old shawl with my hands tied in away from the cold, of running up and down the pavement while she washed and whitened the steps, of seeing the blood run out of the cruel cuts in her hands, and the tears run down her face with the pain of them. Perhaps I remember this the more vividly because she always took so much trouble to tell me I was not to think she was crying—it was only the cold wind that made her eyes water. I know that bleeding hands are not nearly so romantic as bleeding hearts, that broken chilblains are not a theme for poets. I apologise for bringing such repulsive things to your notice. They belong to that ‘Nobody’s Story’ of which we were speaking the other day ; they are the *realities* of life, in comparison with which the sufferings of the sentimentalist are, I venture to think, bearable.”

“Lin, say no more. When your mother said that she knew you better than I, and that you could be cruel, she was right.”

“I am not cruel, I am just. I put her life of hardship against your life of crumpled rose-leaves, and I say that for you to whine about misfortune is—clap-trap ! Of course, I am not talking of the last few months, for I know you have had much to bear, and I have seen you bear it like—like a brick !”

That odd flash of boyish justice, of Lin’s better self, was very welcome to Le Quesne. He smiled ; then, slowly crossing the dusky room, he stood close to the slouching figure dimly outlined against the wall.

“You are severe,” he said gently, “but you are young, and severity belongs to youth. When you are older you will be more merciful. And now, for to-night let us say no more. Perhaps to-morrow things will look less black. I don’t mean that you will have less to forgive, but you may be more capable of forgiving.”

Lin’s tongue was cleaving to his mouth, his heart was sinking in him like a leaden weight. He moved away from the hand held out to him.

“Make no mistake,” he said deliberately. “What we do

not say to-night will be unsaid for ever. There is but one thing to do, and that is to put the greatest obtainable distance between us."

"Lin, you don't mean that?"

"I do. It is the only thing that is clear to me. I must—go. I couldn't stay here to learn to hate you, to look at you, and *know* you for the man I have sometimes thought I could suffer to be hung for! You knew that when you told me I should go."

"You *cannot* go," the husky voice said patiently; "it is out of the question. You could not desert me just for a thing that happened five-and-twenty years ago? Does that change *me*? If I were worth caring for an hour ago, I am worth it now, being the same."

"An hour ago I did not know you; now I do. There lies the difference. The man for whom I gave up my profession is dead. I return to my profession."

"The man is not dead, and you are necessary to his life."

"That is an extravagant assertion, and untrue. By this time to-morrow Dr. Helston will have filled my place. You will not suffer. For me—the engagement I refused a few weeks back is still open to me. I shall go to India with 'Madame.'"

"No, you will not. Even if you could punish me so heavily, there is your mother, upon whom such punishment would fall with double weight."

"She will be at liberty to fill my place—here."

"Which you know she will not do."

"Where you are concerned, I know nothing about her."

They stood quite close to each other for some little time—sometimes speaking, sometimes silent, one cheerily patient, the other hopelessly sullen. Le Quesne saw at last that the thing he had smiled at as impossible was the thing which would happen. Lin meant to go.

The clock chimed ten. Marion knocked, and entered with the supper-tray.

"Oh!" she said, in surprise, "there's no lights!"

"Put the tray down," Le Quesne said, "we will ring when we are ready."

The girl withdrew and closed the door.

"Lin, I will leave you to yourself. I am tired, and want nothing. You are overdone, and will be better alone."

Lin stood upright. He felt as if the dark room were reeling about with him; he put his hand back to the wall to steady himself.



"One moment," he said, and his voice was shaky as he said it; "shall I tell Harker as I—leave—that he has to take my place in your dressing-room to-night?"

"I don't think so. I feel sure you will sleep there yourself, as usual."

"I shall not. Don't misunderstand me. I have never given you any excuse. This is a matter upon which I have spoken my mind more than once, with a plainness which you could not have mistaken. I have said that if I forgive that man I condone his vile offence; if I condone it I descend to his level, and am one with him. You are the man—the rest goes without saying. It is a matter of principle: principles *stand*."

"It is a matter of pride; pride gives way, and you will not sacrifice me to yours."

"Will you answer my question about Harker? If it has been necessary for me to occupy your dressing-room at night, it is necessary for some one to do so when I am—gone. I am not leaving you in a childish fit of passion. I never felt less passionate in my life. I am leaving you because I can do nothing else, because knowing what I do it is impossible for me to stay."

"Take until Monday, and think it over. Then if you find me too hateful—you shall go. I will not say a word to detain you."

"No; I am going—now. I could not be with you and do less for you than I have done; I could not look at you without feeling that for us to be together, *knowing each other*, would be too—horrible!"

"You are quite sure?"

"I am quite sure."

The lifeless voice went straight to Le Quesne's heart. He felt for Lin more than he felt for himself.

"Very well," he said, "you are a free agent, and must do as you like. I think you are deciding against me too hastily, but perhaps I am wrong; perhaps I have not hitherto realised the hold your hatred of your mother's betrayer has obtained over you. I stick to my opinion of you, however, and whether we meet again or not, I shall stick to it still. You are a lot better than you think you are, and if you leave me now the time is not far distant when you will wish you had not. I have spun you down a bit roughly, but you are genuine metal, Lin, and, sooner or later, you will ring true."

He made no response. Hopeless, sullen, and very sore of heart, he stood there leaning against the wall, hugging his

pride under the guise of self-respect, yet knowing that somewhere deep down in him something was struggling to respond to the voice and the touch of the man beside him.

"For the time will come," Le Quesne went on cheerily, "when in thinking of me you will wonder how you could have thought me *quite* so black. I don't mean in my aspect towards your mother—I mean in my relationship to you. I have done *you* no great harm. You say I have tricked you? Well, that is true, and a trick is a dishonest thing; but honesty would have scared you away from me, and I wanted you. Surely a pardonable trick? If I have tried to gain by stratagem that to which I have forfeited my right, I do not think you need resent it quite so bitterly; if I have been too sanguine of success, thinking that the son of so merciful a mother must be merciful too, I think it is a mistake for which you need not be so slow to pardon me. But you think differently, and you say that you must go. I am sorry. I believe you will forgive me, and come back to me. Will you give me your hand? . . . No? . . . Will you let me take yours? . . . No? . . . Impossible, is it? Well, then, never mind. I must wait. Time and the Great Reconciler will bring me better luck."

He waited a moment—moved away—lingered again, saw it was hopeless, and, leaving the room, closed the door behind him.

Unhappy Lin dropped into a chair, and felt that life was over. Yet, why was it over? If this man were so vile, why should separation from him be a matter of regret? He would not regret it. He would get into harness, and get to work again. Surely a pleasant thought, a cheerful, comforting thought? He would go to India with kind-hearted little "Madame." Travelling through a strange land would be the thing for him. Life was all in front of him, and he would forget what lay behind. Oh! he was quite himself, ready to go, eager to go, but—he sat on that chair with his head on his breast, and his arms hanging loosely down at his sides. Apparently he was in no hurry, perhaps because for to-night he could get no farther than Merryon Square.

As he sat in the dark there came to him a sound, a very ordinary sound, but he started to his feet, while all the blood he had surged in a wave to his head. It was the ringing of Le Quesne's bedroom bell. Lin walked across the room and listened, then walked deliberately back. The bell was no more to him than the man who had rung it

Some one would answer it presently. Whether they did or not was no business of his.

As the clock chimed half-past ten, Marion reappeared, or would have done so had it been light enough.

"I beg your pardon," she said, as Lin struck a match. "I thought I heard you go into Mr. Le Quesne's room."

"No. Can I get into my room without going through his?"

"Into his dressing-room, sir? Oh, yes! Up the back staircase and through the other door."

Lin went slowly down to the hall, found the servants' staircase, mounted it, and, entering his room, was conscious of nothing but the fact that the door between it and the next one was half-way open. His first impulse was to shut it, his next to let it alone. What did it matter, open or shut? He was no sneak. He was not *afraid* of the man in that room, surely? He pulled himself up sharply as he realised that he was. What did it mean? Why, that in some way or other he felt—to blame. He had no wish to walk out of that house except in serenest assurance of—right. Had he anything to regret? He tried to recall all that had passed. Yes—there was no denying that Le Quesne had had the best of him—had been temperate, just, and generous. Had *he* been either? No, he had not. He had taunted this man with whining about fancied misfortunes—he who aspired to be just! He thought of him as he had seen him first, when the world went well with him; he thought of him as he had seen him again, when he stood to face defeat with a self-possession savouring of heroism; he thought of the days through which they had passed together since. Dark days of physical suffering and breathless torture, of fainting weariness and utter prostration of mind and body. Had he ever "whined"? ever been impatient, or anything but gratefully considerate to those about him? Lin got up. Clearly here he had been wrong; he must own it. He pushed open the door and stood inside. There was light in the room from a shaded lamp in a far corner. Le Quesne, still fully dressed, had been lying down, but he slowly rose and stood before his stern young censor in silence. Lin did not look at him.

"I apologise for disturbing you. I only wish to say that if to-night I have been extravagant or unjust, I am sorry for having been so."

Le Quesne neither moved nor spoke.

"I don't want you to think I am moved by any mean spirit

of resentment—that I am going because I want to be *revenged*—”

He stopped, perhaps expecting to be helped out. Such help was not forthcoming.

“On the contrary, I should like to feel sure that you will not suffer by my—leaving you ; that my place will be filled by some one who will make up in skill what only affection has done for you through me—”

He stopped again. At the word “affection” something in him gave way. He had not meant to say it, but having said it, it choked him. He felt that for the turning of a straw he could have flung himself upon his knees and sobbed. Had any advance come from the other side then, had the hand which he had refused not long before been offered him again, had the husky voice for which he was listening with a heart-hunger that he would not own have said but one word to him, things might have been different ; but Le Quesne had said his last, had given in, and the moment of opportunity slipped. Lin hesitated, feeling that he had not said what he wanted to say, that he was not leaving with that assurance of right which alone could justify him in doing what he was about to do. He repeated to himself the old jargon about self-respect and principle, and simple appreciation of right and wrong ; but all these dignified hangings in which he sought to take the shelter of justification came down about his ears, and turned into the sorriest rags that ever hung between a man and his better instincts. He raised his head and looked at the dim, standing figure only a few feet away ; but it was so motionless, so unapproachable that Lin steadied again, and, turning, felt for the door.

The standing figure swayed a little then—moved a pace forward, grasping the rail of the bed. Lin did not see the movement, having already passed into the next room, leaving the door of communication a little open, as he had found it. In another minute he had taken up the trifling articles of his own which lay on drawers and dressing-table, and had passed through the outer door, closing it behind him. In the hall he stopped. In a corner stood two portmanteaux, with a strapped-up bundle of sticks and umbrellas and travelling-rugs. Harker could take one of those portmanteaux back and unpack it ; the other could be sent on to Merryon Square. Lin stretched out his hand and took his hat from the stand, starting like a girl at Harker's step behind him.

“Going out, sir ?”

"Yes, Harker!"

The man lingered, looking puzzled.

"Want a breath of air, sir? It's a fine night."

Lin stood irresolute, his heart beating in his throat.

"Harker!" he said, with his back to the man.

"Yes, sir!"

"I am not coming back. Will you sleep in Mr.—Le Quesne's—dressing-room until Dr. Helston has filled my place? I am not saying that it is necessary, but I have accustomed him to a good bit of attention. I am a light sleeper, and don't mind turning out. Don't let him miss it—if you can help it."

He put his hand in his pocket and held the man out half-sovereign. It was the remnant of his professional earnings. Le Quesne had given him some notes only that morning wherewith to defray the expenses of Monday's journey, but he had left them and the remains of one already changed upstairs.

Harker looked longingly at the proffered coin.

"Thank you, sir," he said, "I'd rather not. I've saved a few o' them in my time, but I'd rather *give* a few than *know* you was leavin' him alone, sir."

"He must not be alone, Harker. You must take care of that. You won't forget? Good-night!"

Opening the door, he stepped aimlessly out to the moonlit street. He supposed he must go to Merryon Square. It was the only home he had. Home? He thought of the word with something like a sob. No desolate waif in all London to-night felt more desolate and homeless than did he!

Midnight, and another hour gone by. Annie Deane, lying anxious and wakeful, heard the clocks chime one after the other, and wondered why she felt so restless. Surely she was foolish to be apprehensive? God was in His heaven, and would do all things well. Who had better reason to believe in that than she?

Calmed by the thought, she was growing drowsy, when she was roused again by the sound of wheels. In another moment the street-bell, pealing through the house, had startled all three people in it. Annie hurried on some clothing, and, descending, opened the door. She could not have told why she was sure of seeing Harker, but she was sure, and there he stood.

"What is it?" she said piteously. "What is wrong?"

"I'll see Mr. Warrenner, please," was Harker's careful answer, "and tell him."

"Mr. Warrenner? My son? He isn't here."

"Oh, good Lord!" said Harker, more in distress than irreverence. "I made that sure of findin' him here—I never give it a second thought. Can't you tell me where to find him?"

"Come inside," she said rapidly. "I left my son at your house this afternoon. Tell me what has happened since."

Harker told her what he knew.

"It was near eleven when Mr. Warrenner came down into the hall. He told me he was goin' out, and that he shouldn't come back. I promised him I'd take his place in the dressin'-room, and at half-past eleven I went up to Mr. Le Quesne's room and listened. I couldn't hear a sound. I knocked, and got no answer. I went round then to the dressin'-room by the back staircase and knocked there. I got no answer again, so I opened the door and went in. He'd knelt down by Mr. Warrenner's bed, and had stretched his arms across it. His hands were twisted in the counterpane as if they had clenched in pain. I spoke to him, and lifted him up. Dead? No—no! Thank God, he isn't dead; but if I say what I think—there's very little hope of him."

"Hasn't he said anything?" she asked stolidly.

"Never a word, except when he first come round. 'Harker,' says he, 'Mr. Warrenner took his latch-key. Don't bolt the door—he may want to get in.'"

"Wait one minute," Annie said with decisive brevity. "I won't keep you, but I'm goin' back with you in the cab."

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### "ON A LONG AND DISTANT JOURNEY"

"If Mr. Warrenner comes here, send him straight on to me at Mr. Le Quesne's."

This was the message left at Merryon Square by Annie. Lin did not receive it, however, for he did not go to Merryon Square at all. He drifted on and on—aimlessly, as he had drifted out—with head and heart left behind him. A summer night in the open is no great hardship, and a starry sky is kinder than a roof to a man in trouble. Anyway, Lin sought the shelter of no roof that night, and felt that the most hospitable one under Heaven would have stifled him. But he could not get far away, and when, on looking drearily about, he found himself surrounded by the ghastly skeletons of new buildings, some time to be the homes of men, but at present surrounded by piles of raw material, and bounded by dingy pasture-land or dingier market-garden, he turned and slowly retraced his steps, until the suburban houses, wrapped in night silence, closing him in, told him that he was near home. He smiled as that thought crossed him. There would be but a cold welcome for him in Merryon Square when his mother knew what he had to tell her. He doubted whether the same home would ever again be practicable for him and her. She would never forgive him.

"Evil is her good where you are concerned," he had told Le Quesne bitterly. Almost could he have persuaded himself to say, "Where you are concerned, let evil be my good too." For the more he tried to get away from it, the more he realised how much of good there was in this man. If it were good to be patient, if it were good to be brave, if it were good to be generous, if it were good to be unselfish—then was Lindsay Le Quesne a good man, in spite of the sin of his youth. Of the struggle which tore Lin's very heart asunder before he could bring himself to own this naked truth, it would take too long to tell; of the struggle which followed the acknowledgment of that truth it would be impossible to speak intelligibly, so fierce was it, so keen, and so confused, raging ever round one quiet figure, the supreme dignity of which it could not touch.

"I have sinned. I acknowledge it. I have repented, and have accepted my punishment. God asks no more than this, why should *you*—you, who, in spite of your fancied wrongs, stand more worthily in the ranks of men to-day than if I had been responsible for your upbringing?"

Another truth of the—apparently—inverted order. Lin seized it, ready to prove it a lie. He could prove nothing, save that it was truth. He *did* stand worthily in the ranks of men, thanks to himself, and to none other. He had learned what it was to stand alone, to be self-reliant, and he who learns that is "clad in complete steel," fearless, with leisure to use his eyes, with liberty to be himself. Without any undue elation, he saw that all he knew worth knowing his poverty and his independence had taught him.

—Then, again, had he suffered any loss directly traceable to this man's door? Was he not to-day exactly what of all things he would have chosen to be? Could he say with any truth, "But for the stain upon my birth, I might have been so-and-so, or so-and-so?" He was a pleasantly-successful artist, popular and content, leading a life of his own selection, and that by no man's favour or patronage. Here, too, the quiet voice he knew had something to say to him:

"Do you owe me nothing on the score of inheritance? Whence comes your voice, if not from mine? What has been the love of your life since boyhood? The love of music transmitted to you by me. The best I had to give is yours."

Oh! that quiet figure standing in the gloom of a semi-lighted room, how it haunted him! Turn where he would, he saw it. The very sin with which the figure was burdened failed to cast the shadow about it that he *tried* to see, so hedged about was it with love's own radiance. In vain he tried to keep the story of his birth well in front of him, to remember his mother's blighted youth and toilsome middle-age; in vain he told himself that forgiveness of these things was not in human nature. In the next moment he found himself wondering—wondering—with drawn brows and suspended breath, like one who listens in fear. Would *he* be all right to-night? If he were ill, would he let Harker do for him what he, Lin, had been used to do? He thought not, for though Le Quesne had disguised nothing from him, he had turned from the sympathy of others with the sensitive, shrinking pain of an erstwhile sovereign, now discrowned. Lin set his teeth in rage. What to him was the man, or his loneliness, or his pain? Nothing—nothing! Said the voice of truth within him: "How can you say that? He is the one



reality of your life to-night. How *can* he be? Never mind how. He *is*, and all the 'how' and 'why' in the world beating against that fact cannot do away with it *as* a fact."

"Well," said Lin, the self-opinionated and obstinate, "this proves that I am leaving him in no mean spirit of resentment. I can still wish him well, still hope that some one will be good to him—oh! very good to him—but that could not be *me*!"

"Could it not? then why, as you think of him tended by others, is there something in your heart that feels like jealousy?"

Lin set his teeth again.

"I have not had time to forget him," he said to the pitiless voice; "indifference does not come all at once."

He walked on, while the stars paled and the grey dawn laid a chill hand upon him, body and mind. He was so very wretched, poor Lin! He could not give in; he honestly felt he was making a gallant stand for his principles; so he hugged his righteousness to his bosom, and got no warmth from the dry bones thereof. Affectionate he was—rarely so for a man; his association with Le Quesne had taught him how much love for another can take a man out of himself; he had learnt much of what love for another means, much—but not all.

And, indeed, it is given to very few, that power of going the whole length! It had been given to poor, despised Jim Drake in days gone by, when he had said to the girl who had sinned, "Never mind what you have done, since it was you who did it. It cannot make any difference between you and me." But then Jim was only a common man, who went his way untrammelled by the fetters of pride or self-righteousness.

As the sun rose over the dim city, transfiguring it, Lin realised that he was tired, also that it was Sunday morning. This last was an irritating reflection. He could do nothing to-day—nothing at all? Well, he could call on "Madame" later on, and let her know that he was at liberty. By the end of the week he would probably be far away.

As the sun rose higher he turned into one of the parks and sat down. The narrow river was breaking up into innumerable little diamond sparkles; every blade of grass as it quivered under the morning breeze let fall a gem; the trees, "waving their long arms to and fro," made a lulling sound like the wash of a low tide on a level shore. The sound smote straight to Lin's heart, and the tears rose in his sullen eyes. They were to have gone to the sea to-morrow, he and that other one—they would not go now. *He* would not care to go with a stranger. Lin started up. The long, low sighing was unbearable—it

crept about him as the night breeze had done in that dusky room last night. "Pity him!" it said eerily. "Go back to him. Go back to him; he said you would." Lin turned and fled as from a ghost. He walked about again until eight o'clock, when he found himself near a church. Leaning against the railings, he saw a man come and unlock the church door, and soon after the bell struck out for early service. The worshippers were mostly women—poor, unpretentious, chiefly old or middle-aged. The late June sunshine, painfully bright to eyes that had watched the night out, made the cool darkness of the church inviting, and Lin drifted in with the rest. He sat down just inside, frowning in weary impatience at the officious woman who instantly pounced upon him to show him to a seat.

"I am not going to stay," he said sullenly, "I only want a rest."

The woman let him alone.

He had no intention of staying or of joining in the service, but at the first words from the altar he lifted his head and tried to see the man who uttered them. Not that he needed his eyes to tell him who the man was. That sonorous, penetrating, soul-stirring voice could belong to no other than to Frank Netherwood. Having found out this, Lin sat still with a sense of returning calm. To be where *he* was must of necessity mean something good.

The service was extremely short, the prescribed "homily" being omitted. When it came to the offertory, Netherwood—not for the first time—laid himself open to the charge of heterodox tendencies in that he did deliberately add to and take from the list of sentences provided by the Church for the officiating priest. One or two straw-splitting Pharisees had more than once made indignant protest, but the offender had smiled, and his Bishop had turned a deaf ear.

Speaking from the fulness of his own heart to the hearts of those present, desiring not even his own wealth of content and happiness while he stood in the midst of the spiritual poverty of others, he raised his voice in its mingled strength and sweetness:

• • • • •  
"Whoso hath this world's goods, and seeth another have need, and shutteth up his compassion from him—how dwelleth the love of God in him?"  
• • • • •

"While we have time"—he stopped, turned his pale face and shining eyes upon the standing people as one who would impress upon them how little time there is—"while we have time, let us do good unto *all* men."

. . . . .

"Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, even so do unto them; for *this* is the Law and the Prophets."

. . . . .

There was still a moment left. The great heart that beat with those among which it lived, that felt for them, knowing their needs, that could not send them away empty while it had aught to give, spoke out again without the book, while the deep voice through which it spoke echoed and thrilled in the distant corners of the half-filled church:

"This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, saith the Lord. I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them; and *their sins and iniquities I will remember no more.*"

Lin Warrener, stricken and ashamed, with that divine promise in his ears, rose and stumbled out again to the brilliant, sunlit street. Merryon Square was no home for him—the church offered him no shelter. Charity dwelt in these places, and with Charity he was not in touch. He knew it now. Netherwood had not exchanged services for nothing.

Lin wandered back to the park and sat down again, with the "soughing" in his ears that was like the wash of the waves on the shore. He did not mind it now. It hurt him? Well, he deserved to be hurt—he who had turned a deaf ear to a man's misery, had hugged his pride and called it principle. He hugged it still, but he knew it for what it was. He was no nearer going back to Le Quesne than he had been before. One devil cast out, four or five entered and tore him.

"How can you go back?" said one; "you made such a stand, and were so positive. You would have to own yourself *all* wrong, which you are not."

"Besides," said another, "he is a shrewd man of the world. He has given you to understand more than once that he has made provision for you. You did *not* understand then, now you do. He will think that you return to him to secure that."

Lin's white face turned scarlet at the thought.

"He won't, he won't," his heart said quietly; "he knows me better."

And then he temporised with that subtle devil of Independence.

“How would it be to get back to work again, and having done so, to drift back gradually into intercourse with him? Then, if he wished it, if I saw that I was really necessary to him—”

“Exactly,” said the devil, “the very thing that would show beyond dispute that you wanted nothing of him.”

Lin was beginning to sneak out of the difficulty by a back way.

“While we have time,” said Netherwood’s voice—“while we have time—”

“There is—plenty of time,” said a fresh adversary; “he is not dying; he is better—much better. There is no hurry.”

But above the voices of the devil-crew, the voice of Lin’s better self did from time to time make itself heard in no uncertain tone.

“He is so lonely,” it said, “and every hour of even this day will be like two to him! Besides, he is so sure to be knocked up. If this has upset *you*, what effect do you think it will have upon a man who has been ill for months, and whose fear of losing *you* has kept him down? Think what a fear it must have been, think what he must have suffered when he heard you talk of him as of the lowest criminal unhung! Think of the struggle he must have passed through before he resolved to make that terrible confession! Think of his voice as he made it, of the imploring grip of his icy hand! And you struck it away from you.”

Said Lin in torture: “If I could forget all else, there is the horrid tie between us. How can I go back—remembering *that*?”

That tie was the last stumbling-block. As far as that he could get, but no farther; it turned him back again and again. All else his love for the man could conquer, but that thought conquered him. Le Quesne himself had known how it would be when he had heard the strained voice say, “For us to be together—*knowing* each other—would be too horrible!” And he had said to himself, with a hopeless smile, “The tie which should have bound us is the sword that divides us; what a man sows, that shall he also reap.”

The day wore on. Lin, heavy-eyed from want of sleep, and faint from unaccustomed fasting, still drifted here and there,

sometimes driven by the goad of his own thoughts, sometimes by the near proximity of people whom he felt rather than saw. After a while he ceased to think connectedly at all, being too tired. Thought drifted aimlessly, as *he* did. When the bells chimed for morning service they turned into the "Hiawatha," and sung it to him not unwelcomely—the quaint and beautiful thing that he loved. Even when the bells had ceased it remained with him. A musical brain is seldom empty of rhythm.

"I am going  
On a long and distant journey,  
To the portals of the sunset,  
To the regions of the home-wind,  
Of the North-West wind—Keewaydin."

The hush of service-time settled over everything—brooded—lifted—passed away. The Park was alive with a gay throng of fashionable people, and Lin, retreating to a quiet corner, flung himself down on the warm and friendly earth, wrapped in bodily and mental apathy. For a while the song of the bells remained with him, shifting to and fro; but at last, when the sun had started on its westward course, and the curious, dreamy quiet which belongs to a Sunday afternoon pervaded everything, his tired brain gave way, and he slept.

. . . . .

He thought he was in a boat with Le Quesne, drifting fast and faster on the full tide of a summer sea, away, away, to the horizon line, until nothing was to be seen around them but sea and sky, between which their boat seemed to be suspended like a toy. He thought he began to fear, and to say to his companion that they were out too far to get back in safety by nightfall. But Le Quesne, with sad eyes fixed on the horizon line, made no answer. And Lin grew more and more afraid, for that arching line, as they flew on, ceasing to fly before them, stood, and turned into a shining wall, in which was a door wide enough to admit many men at once. When they had drifted right up to it, Le Quesne stepped on to the edge of the boat, turned his eyes towards the world that he was quitting, and from there to Lin.

"Good-bye," he said; "your pride has brought me to the end of my journey. I wanted to have lingered with you, for you were dear to me; but you have brought me here, and I must stay, while you go back into the world of men—alone."

Lin saw him step off and enter the gate in the shining wall. But as he stretched his hands towards that gate, with a prayer to be admitted too, the voice, growing fainter in the distance, told him that he could not come yet.

"Go back," it said sorrowfully, "over the troubled sea of human life, to learn your lesson as I learned mine—to make of your mistakes the stepping-stones to better things. Don't lament things gone. Make of repentance a future to be lived rather than a past to be brooded over. For me, I am no more with you or of you. Love and Hate alike are powerless to wake in me an answer. I am content."

He scrambled to his feet and looked about him, at the green of the waving trees, at the blessed light of the sun, at the brown of the laughing river; he felt his own warm, living flesh. He was alive, and not in the land of shadows. So, thank God! was that other, and he would go back to him. They would still have some time together, they would go on that journey to-morrow after all, would spend their summer days upon the sea. He would forget the awful bar between them. He could never make of it a *tie*, but it must be forgotten—like the rest. To him the man must always be "Lindsay Le Quesne"; that, and nothing else.

In the early dusk of the summer evening, when the great red moon was rising and the London streets were thronged with people who had no time to notice him, he went very slowly back. Not all willingly, any more than all unwillingly—not all shrinkingly, any more than all eagerly—not from duty, nor from any sense of the beauty of self-sacrifice—but from affection, solely. Lin had learnt his lesson, had gone the whole length, had shut his eyes to the sin for the sake of the sinner, and was going back to be the same to him as he had been before; was going back for the simple reason that he could not stay away.

He let himself in with his latch-key, and hung up his hat and coat unseen by anyone—also, unseen by anyone, he went by way of the servants' stairs up to his room, to Le Quesne's dressing-room.

It felt like coming home. He stopped to make himself presentable; twenty-four hours in the open without food or a wash had made of him rather a ghastly object. He smiled as he saw his own reflection, thinking that he looked as ill as he

felt, which was saying a great deal. The door between that room and the next was shut. Everything was perfectly quiet. Lin sat down for a moment to steady his head, for it was beating painfully. Concluding that the longer he waited the worse he would feel, he put out his hand and opened the closed door. Le Quesne would be in the drawing-room. Lin would go quietly to the back of the big chair, and touch him as he had often done before. They would probably both make fools of themselves, but there would be little said.

Inside the door he stopped—why he could not have told. The black-and-gold screen at the foot of the bed hid it from him; the blinds of the two big windows were drawn, though the windows were opened from the top; the bed-clothes, tidily folded as though they would not be wanted, were piled upon two chairs. With closed eyes and a heart upon which iron hands seemed to have put a sudden pressure, Lin stumbled to the edge of the screen and lifted his head. The bed was very white and smooth, and in the centre, under the sheet, still and cold and peaceful, Lindsay Le Quesne lay, with his uncovered face turned heavenward. He was alone, but he craved no companionship; he would lie in awful solitude through many a day and night to come, but he would not complain nor think himself neglected; though they surrounded him with a very army of watchers he would not raise his hand to ask of one of them the smallest service. Alone or not alone—it was all one to him now. For he was—dead.

Annie had been home to Merryon Square, and had just come back. As she entered the hall her eyes fell upon Lin's hat and coat.

"My son!" she said frantically to the girl who had admitted her. "Oh, where is he? Who told him?"

The girl looked startled.

"If he *is* in," she said, "he can't have been in two minutes, and no one has told him."

She staggered past the girl and up the stairs. She had had hard thoughts of Lin to-day—even she, the patient and the merciful, had said in her heart that God would punish him and that it would be just.

But now—she had only one thought, to spare him if she could, to save him the cruel shock of entering that room all unprepared. Reaching the dressing-room, she saw that she was too late; the other door stood open—open, as Lin had left it. By this time, then, he—*knew*.

She never spoke, nor moved. With dumb lips and hands pressed hard over her heart she stood and waited—listening—listening. She could not call him back—she dared not follow him through that open door; but as she thought of him, she wished that she and the dead could have changed places. For she knew now that the dead had been dearer to him than she could ever be, else had he never forgiven him so soon! It was not long—perhaps not many minutes, before the silence of that room was broken by a heavy footstep crossing it, by the slow closing of a door and the grate of a turning key. Annie crept up close to the door then, and, kneeling down, laid her cold cheek against it. Lin must suffer for his mistake, as she had suffered for hers—must win his victory, as she had done—unaided and alone. Love, even her love, could not help him in this dire extremity; sympathy, even her sympathy, would fail to comfort him. And so, for a while, she did not try to comfort him; only knelt there with dry eyes and aching limbs and bleeding heart, suffering dumbly pang for pang with the child she had borne in love and sorrow.

She could not cry, she could not pray; could only wish that she were dead—as *he* was.

But when the long night had nearly worn away she crept downstairs to Harker, who, undemonstrative, but faithful, had not gone to bed.

"I can't bear this," she said piteously. "I'm *afraid*. I haven't heard a sound. There's other doors into that room. Are they all locked?"

"I think so," Harker said; "but one is never *unlocked*, and so that key must be with mine. I'll see."

He found the key and let her in.

She felt her way across the dark room, and laid her hand unerringly on Lin's bowed head. She shivered a little as she sat down beside him, for she felt that the dead man's *arm* was round his neck. She did not take it away.

"Tired, darlin', an' cold?" she said gently. "You must be, kneelin' here! I've got somethin' to tell you, that p'raps in time you'll like to think about. Harker come for you last night, an' you wus not there, so I come myself instead, because I knowed what had happened. I was with *him* all the time. He couldn't say much, but once he tried to ast me what wus wrong with him, an' I told him that the doctor said it wus his heart. He looked a bit surprised, an' smiled.

"'It can't be that,' he said; 'I have no heart left. Lin broke it, and took it away with him.'



"And then, Lin, I told him—a *lie*. I said as you'd forgive him, an' wus comin' back to him the same as ever, but that the findin' out of things had that upset you that you'd have been no good to him, so you sent me—instead. An' as I spoke I prayed to God to make that lie a truth. 'He'll be back to-night,' I said; 'he's only stoppin' to pull round a little, so as he shan't distress you.'

"He looked at me very hard, but I never flinched, an' at last I see that he believed me. He turned quite quiet then an' went to sleep, an' in his sleep he died. So, do you see, my darlin', that he *knew* you had forgive him? For you *had*. You come back to him just when I said you would. God heard my prayer, an' made my lie come true."

## CHAPTER XXXIX

### THE TWO THAT ARE LEFT

It is a still, clear afternoon in late autumn, and the scene is shifted back to the Berkshire village that we know. In the tangle of bramble and bracken under the moveless pines the children are searching for blackberries, as other children now grown up searched in the years gone by; on a low branch of a leafless hazel a robin is singing cheerily. Away in the straggling street the doors are open, and the women, with their children in their arms, call to each other across the way, while from the other end of the village the clang of the forge sounds musically. The Forge Cottage is spick and span, as it was twenty years ago. The Gloire de Dijon, then but a straggling shoot, now climbs to the very roof, and is creeping round to the south wall, where the yellow grapes hang ripening. The clock is striking four as the blacksmith, turning up one corner of his apron, goes round to the back of the house and looks in at a window. A pleasant, roomy apartment is this into which he peers. The fire is bright, the kettle bright too; the square table in the centre of the room is cleared for tea, but that is all at present, for it is not quite tea-time. At the table sits a small and slenderly-made woman. You might take her for a girl, so slight is she and fair; but the face is a woman's face, and the eyes have a patient look that does not belong to youth. On her lap, showing white against the black of her gown, a folded letter lies—a letter which begins with "My dear mother," and ends with "Yours always, Lin." She shakes her head as she thinks of him, and into her patient eyes the tears come, for Lin is many a mile away.

How comes she here? That is easily told.

For seven years Jim Drake and Alice, his wife, were childless; but after that, as if to make up for lost time, children were born to them quickly—all too quickly for the ailing, irritable mother, and with the eighth she died. Then the grandmother, a hearty, buxom woman still, said:

"Jim, what can a man like you do wi' eight children, and

the oldest scarce fourteen? I've got a thing in my head. You know our Annie? Well, I never told your poor Alice, but one day this summer our Annie come home, an', Jim, we've judged her wrong, for she's no bad woman, an' never have bin. She've worked hard. I knows all about her. Them days, when Alice thought I was in Readin', I went to London, an' stayed wi' Annie at the place where she've bin a'most since ever she left here. I see the old gentleman—and, Jim, I see her son. He's that quiet and gentle-like with *her*, poor thing; but he'd never be at home wi' humble folk like us—he's a gentleman, every inch. Says I to Annie when I come away, 'When the old man dies—an' he's a great age now—what'll you do, my gal?' An' says she to me, 'I don't know, mother; that'll depend on circumstances.' 'You'll live wi' yer son?' says I. She shook her head. 'He's trav'lin' mostly,' she says, 'an' I couldn't never be idle now. I've thought sometimes as I'd like to help among the poor, or be a mother to some poor childern as hasn't got one.' Now, Jim, here's jest the sort o' thing."

"But," Jim had said, "how about the old gent, mother?"

"He's bin dead this three months, an' Annie's bin wi' her son; but she told me that he was goin' forrin soon, an' then she meant to find some sort o' work, for tho' he kep' on as she should go where *he* went, she didn't see as that wus really necessary for him, an' she thought as she'd do better doin' for herself at home. I've wrote an' told her our poor Alice is gone, an' you mark my words, Jim, our Annie'll come an' see after your poor childern, till you can turn yerself round a bit."

And Jim had written to Annie, asking her.

At first Lin had refused to hear of it, but Annie meant to have her way.

"You won't want me, dear," she had said; "I'd be dreadful lonely an' out o' place travellin' about in foreign parts. Lin, I never *meant* to go. Whenever you come back agen, I'll come to London an' keep a home together for you, but now I'm goin' to see what I can do for them childern."

And Lin, sorely against his will, had taken her into Berkshire himself.

"I believe you are making a martyr of yourself," he had said sorrowfully, as he left her behind. "I can't think you *want* to stay and be a slave to a tribe of rough childern."

"I daresay they do seem rough to you, dear," she had said; "but they're nice little things enough, an' I shan't mind."

She has been a good mother to that rough tribe for some-

thing like three years. Only once has she felt like leaving them, and that was when Jim, having completed his period of mourning, wanted to marry her. She only smiled.

"It isn't lawful, Jim," she said tranquilly.

"Here, p'raps not, but it's lawful enough in the Colonies ; and to one o' them, if you'll say the word, we'll go. What's right in one part o' the world must be right all the world over."

"No, Jim, I shall never go. An' it was lawful here to-morrow, I couldn't marry you, nor any man besides. An' if that's what's in your mind, Jim, I mustn't stop here to make you unhappy."

"You won't do that, Annie," said Jim stolidly. "I'm not such a fool. Wife or no wife, I'm more comfortable now than ever I was wi' your poor sister, for she wusn't *you*, nor anythink like you. So we'll let it be. O'ny I do think as it's a lonely life for you—slavin' for other folks' childern, wi' the one as *is* yours doin' the grand miles away."

Jim is jealous of Lin, and always will be.

"Lin is very good to me," Annie said, flushing. "If his life takes him far out o' the track o' mine, that's no fault o' his."

"Well, I will say," said Jim deliberately, "that he ain't my idea of a *son*. He's 'Mr. Warrener,' ain't he? He's no 'Deane.' *That* ain't good enough. He've plenty o' money, an' as fur as I can see, he keeps it to hisself."

"You don't know, Jim, an', for Lin's sake, I'll tell you. He haven't plenty o' money ; that is, not what people thinks he have. He lives on what he earns. The other wus left him by his—father, Jim ; but he've never took no pleasure in it, an' the greatest part of that goes to Mr. Netherwood to help the poor. He've wanted me to take some of it, often, but I never could. It's his by *right*, but for me to live on it'd be wrong. Besides, Mr. Holt left me a pound a week as long as I lives, an' I don't want no more."

"An' you knew the lad's father, then, after all?"

"It come about," she said quietly, "through Lin. He loved my Lin. Yes, Jim, I lived to be o' some little good to him. I was with him when he died, an', when I see he was dead, I knew my heart was dead, too. You'll see now, Jim, why I couldn't marry no other man."

"So he's dead," said Jim thoughtfully. "Well, they do say as where he's gone there's no marryin' nor givin' in marriage."

Jim's personal experiences permit him to face this prospect with fortitude and resignation.

"An' if there is, I shan't be his wife, Jim, though I knows

where to find her. I've never spoke to her, but I've watched her once or twice when she didn't know it, to see what sort o' woman *he'd* loved. I see enough to show me why he could never have cared for me. I never see anybody like her. I've got good reason to be grateful to her, for I think if it hadn't bin for her Lin'd never have looked up agen after *he* died. He wus like a broken-hearted thing, an' she seemed to know how to get at him, where I didn't. She's an opera singer, an' it's her what Lin has travelled with ever since. What's her age? She's older than me, but she looks that young! an' they say her voice is most as good as ever. Lin manages everything for her—business affairs an' all that. He owes her a lot. Her takin' him up have made him. She won't sing with anybody, an' she will have him where she is."

Jim was silent, but not convinced, having opinions concerning singers and their ways entirely original and independent. He has never since reverted to the subject of marriage, thinking it better to leave things as they are. He sees his children take their troubles to the quiet little woman, sure of a sympathetic listener; he sees them grow less rough by sheer force of contact with her gentleness; he sees them tell her the truth without fear, where they used to tell "mother" untruths rather than run the risk of punishments entirely lacking in judgment, or of harsh vituperation, innocent alike of justice and self-respect; he sees even his eldest girl, pert and vain as was her mother, shamed into silence by simple modesty and patience; he feels the awful blank in the house when Lin comes home and "Auntie" is wanted elsewhere. And he is very well content. "Anyway," thinks Jim simply, "I can do a little for her. I can see as she haves a comfortable roof over her head, an' I knows that she shan't want for anything as long as I'm alive. If *she* don't ast for no more, why should I? I'd rather things bide as they are, as long as she's satisfied."

So Jim goes tranquilly about his work, and lets the future take care of itself.

When Lin comes back—he is expected in the Spring—Annie will be waiting for him in the comfortable London rooms which are "home" to him whenever he is in England. For the first little while she will feel—as she always does when he returns after a long absence—diffident and awkward, a little afraid of him, as of one with whom she is not quite in touch; for the first few days, indeed, she will have much ado to look at him with anything approaching calmness, so sharply do the

passing years accentuate his likeness to the dead. The eyes are *his*; the voice is *his*; so are the courteous ways and the rare, thoughtful smile. That boyish brightness of expression which once obscured the likeness is quite gone now, banished for ever by one memory which never sleeps. But after the first few days Annie's strangeness will wear off, for she will see that under the surface Lin is *her* Lin still, that without appearing to notice her wistful attempts to seem quite at her ease with him he will yet understand everything; will give her a little time; but then, coming quietly behind her, will say laughingly, with his face to hers:

"Mother, how long am I to be treated as a 'distinguished stranger'?" After which she will have a quiet "cry," and it will be all right.

They will talk of many things and of many people; he will tell her of his busy life; she will tell him of her quiet one; many questions will be asked and answered. But there will be one name unspoken by either, and upon one subject will they both be silent, not by any arrangement, simply by mutual appreciation of the futility of words. Each will know that in the heart of the other one thought is uppermost, one longing unappeased, one sorrow uncomforted; but they will bear their burden silently, in outward cheerfulness—she for his sake, and he for hers.

There will be days when he will tell her that he has engagements, and will not be home until late. Then, waiting until he has left the house, she will put on her prim little black bonnet, and will find her way to one of two places. If she is late in setting out she will go to the Home, where the Sisters will extend to her the right hand of sympathy and appreciation, and aged Sister Elizabeth will insist upon keeping her to tea; if she has plenty of time she will go—partly by 'bus and partly on foot—to quite another part of London, will thread her way through a network of dingy by-ways, courts, and alleys, until she comes to one alley more dingy than the rest. Down this one she will go—rather timidly, for the inhabitants thereof are veritably "unclean." Unclean of person, of mind, of spirit, yet having one dweller among them, who, content to pass with the reputable for all three, is in reality neither. Finding her way up stairs many and steep, mended here with a scrap of rough board, there with a bit of tin, and everywhere with a sublime disregard of the probability of accidents, Annie will knock at a door upon the topmost landing. She will not feel sure of getting an answer, because the

occupant of the room may be out. Say she is in, she will open the door; perhaps impatiently, perhaps aggressively, for she is a creature of the untamable kind, and not much given to surface civility unless she gets it in advance. At sight of Annie she will soften.

"You again?" she will say, with a gleam of pleasure in her defiant eyes; "come in—if you can *get* in."

And "in" Annie will go, shutting the rickety door behind her.

Perhaps she will find the room full of the steam of "washing," the bare window trickling, the bare walls in a ghastly perspiration, the worm-eaten floor soaked and sloppy; perhaps the washing will be over, and "drying" will be the order of the day; then damp clothes will cling about her head as she stoops under the lines that are stretched from wall to wall, and the window will be open, admitting more "blacks" than breezes; perhaps there will be nothing more depressing about than an ironing-board, supported at one end by the window-sill, at the other by the back of a chair; then that interior will represent dry desolation instead of wet, but "desolation" will be the word for it all the same.

Two or three times Annie has found the bed on the floor in the corner occupied by two or three babies, all more or less puny and ill-nourished, left here by mothers who are "out to work." Sometimes she has found babies, washing, drying, ironing, all in course of progress at once; then she has straightway pinned up her prim black gown, and set to work herself.

"Why don't I get out of this into a better neighbourhood?" the tenant of the room will say in answer to Annie's gentle question. "Where's the better neighbourhood that will find *me* anything to do? And what is the neighbourhood to *me*? It can't make work and me friends. Do you think I like washing? I hate it! Do you think I enjoy this steaming place? To me it's a touch of the 'hereafter.' Do you think I've got any love in me for those miserable, sour-smelling, half-fed babies? No. I never liked babies, even up to the chin in lace, and smelling of scented powder. I always hated trouble and hard work. I hate it now."

"But," Annie will urge earnestly, "why *don't* you go to the Sisters? I do know they would help you to get something better than this."

"Go to them? Not me! I hate *them*, and they know it. What's the first thing they'd say to me? 'You must come in,

and let us see that your repentance is genuine. We can't do anything until we know that you have a new heart, and have left the old life behind you.' No, they won't *say* that, but they'll as good as say it. Here I'm wretched enough, but when I've done I can lock my door and be my own mistress. There's nobody spying about me, or making inquiries. I'm not *rung* to bed at nine, and rung up at six; I'm not 'gaol<sup>er</sup>' by a couple of solemn-faced girls who never knew what temptation was, and who wouldn't have given way if they had—out of fear of being punished. If I fall away, I can struggle back again unhindered. I've got my liberty."

"But you don't fall away; I'm that sure you don't."

"Then you're the only one to *be* sure. No—there's one besides. I've been to him twice—once because I hadn't a penny nor a bit of bread, and once because a woman left her baby with me and never came for it again. Neat, wasn't it? Made me think of the tricks I've played people in my time. I couldn't keep the poor brat, so I went to *him*. I told him where I lived, and what I was doing. Did *he* throw cold water on me? No! Did *he* say I must change my clothes before he could believe I'd changed my ways? Not he! He believed me. 'Keep on,' he said; 'I told you I knew you better than you knew yourself. We work out our own salvation in our own way. If your way is not my way, it is no part of my duty to doubt you because of that. If you want anything, come to me; if you cannot come, send. You know where I live.'

"He sent for the baby the next day, and several times since I've had a note from him asking if I was getting on, and whether I wanted anything. He doesn't *come*; do you know why? He'd be afraid I thought he suspected me. Now, drop me. Kate Lucas I was born, and Kate Lucas I shall die. 'One of the hopeless sort!' they used to say. Let them think so, God knows. Now tell me what you are doing, and all about it."

Annie will tell her something of her own affairs, will find something nice for tea in the basket she brought with her, will beg Kate to write and tell her if work fails, and funds run out, and will take her departure under Kate's protection. When they get to the end of the network of dirty streets and alleys they will kiss each other publicly, after the fashion of their common kind, and will go their separate ways.

On these days of separation from Lin, Annie will feel no curiosity concerning his whereabouts. If his engagements are



professional she will know it; if not, he is sure to be found at Miss—or, as she is usually called, "Madame"—Le Breton's house. He knows that house. He has a key with which he admits himself, asking no permission; he goes upstairs with the air of one who has a right, gives a light knock at a familiar door, and is forthwith bidden to enter.

Almost everything in the beautiful room he enters is his, but he has not removed as much as one costly trifle, and it all looks much the same as it looked on that summer night, now nearly four years ago. Even the big "grand"—made expressly for a famous singer by a celebrated house, and having his hieroglyphic, "L. A. Le Q.," inlaid at one corner—stands open across the old angle. Lin never touches it. He has not felt justified in taking up his residence in these rooms—not that he shuns them, simply that he feels them to be beyond his present position. So "Madame," having no home in London, takes them off his hands. When she is away they are closed, and the big "grand" relapses into silence.

The name which is never mentioned between Lin and his mother is yet spoken freely and lovingly enough here. It is the link between Lin and the woman who lives here. He has kept nothing away from her, and she has turned his confidence to rarely good account. She has studied him, puzzled over him, mastered him, saved him from the moral death-trap of remorse by urging him to fresh effort, and so has made of him what perhaps he never had been but for her. He sometimes wonders why he can talk to her of the dead while he cannot to his mother, and thinks it must be that here his mother is too far away—at once too far above him and too far below. It is more difficult to talk to the woman who loved "not wisely, but too well" than it is to the woman who loved too wisely, and not well enough.

He has altered in many ways, but such alteration is more below the surface than upon it, and his early friends—the Hoskins, for instance—will tell you that he is just the same as ever. He looks, perhaps, older than he is; feels much older, wonders sometimes if indeed it is true that he is but eight-and-twenty! He gives himself but little leisure, for he has found that leisure means regret, and his is a nature for which the sun can do more than the shade. "He is above everything affectionate," said one, in speaking of him once to his mother. He is affectionate still, but the springs lie deeper, and are not easily reached by a strange hand. A quiet man, though manly of word and deed; a just man, but now most merciful;

naturally impatient of wrong-doing, but ever ready to extend to the wrongdoer the hand of brotherhood—he goes his way, honestly desiring to obey a command the full significance of which he was at first too wretched to appreciate.

“Make of repentance a future to be lived rather than a past to be brooded over.”

Those unforgotten words and Helen Le Breton’s influence have made him what he is.

She, looking at him thoughtfully, is apt to wonder why Love has as yet no place in his life. It is not that he is not lovable, or that sweet eyes do not tell him so. On the contrary, he is just one of those men to whom such eyes are prone to say too much. But the love of women is nothing to Lin. It is such a serious thing, thinks he; a thing of sorrow and disappointment, and of life laid waste, rather than of gay laughter, marriage bells, and vows too lightly spoken.

Anyway, Lin is wholly free, and “Madame” is not anxious to see him enslaved. For he is very dear to her, and a woman’s affection for a man—even though she be twice his age, and beyond all suspicion of foolishness—is seldom quite impersonal.

. . . . .

When Lin’s sojourn in London is once more at an end, he and his mother—with many a kiss and many a broken word—will part; he, perhaps, with the keener sense of loneliness.

Far down in the Berkshire village the children will be waiting to welcome her; Jim will have the cottage all swept and garnished for her home-coming, while on every side will rise the grateful assurance that she is of use, of genuine value, to those with whom she lives. A meek woman and unambitious, she will see in this assurance enough to make her very well content.

And Lin?

Before he leaves the shores of the “kingdom by the sea,” to the love of which he was first awakened by a voice now mute, he will take his solitary way to a spot which—let him be where he may—is seldom absent from his thoughts. The sound of the sea comes there, with the weird cry of the circling gull and the deep boom of the guns that welcome England’s ships as they come harbourwards.

And there in a sunny corner is a grave, bearing upon the cross at its head an inscription which has proved to the many a stumbling-block, but to the few a truth:—

**Annie Deane****LINDSAY LE QUESNE,**

Born, May 15th, 18—,

Died, June 12th, 18—.

"And God created man . . . in the image of God created  
He him. . . . And God saw . . . that He had made,  
behold it was very good."

**THE END**

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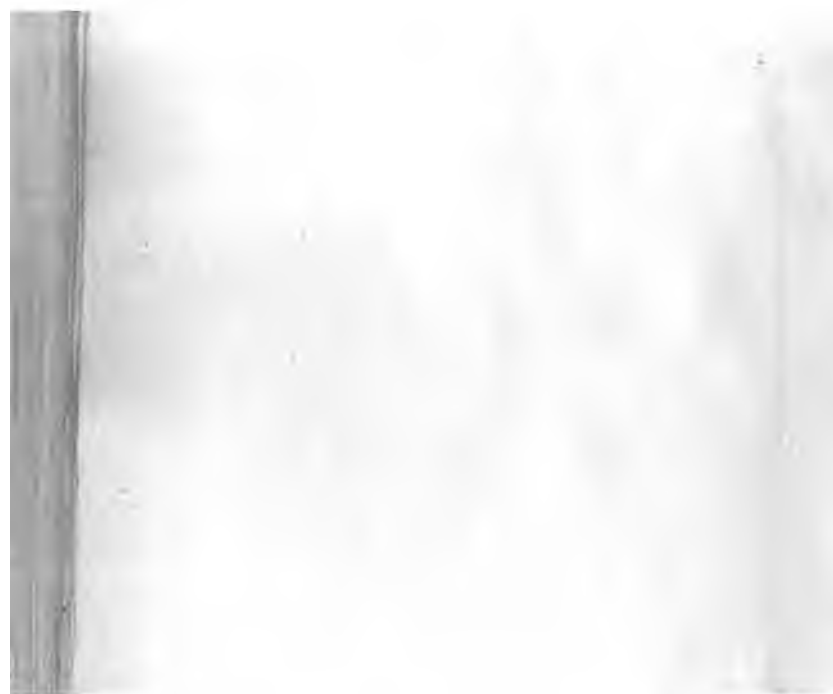
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